SCORCHED ROSE

THORN TRILOGY
A PREQUEL

JANUARY JAMES

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About the Author
Also by January James

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Proofread and paperback cover design by The Word Tank
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I should probably point out before you dive in, that I'm a British author, writing about British people, in British settings. I occasionally use universal terms for things like 'elevators' and 'panties', but sometimes regional variations do sneak through. 'Gob-smacked' for instance, is a Britishism meaning 'lost for words', and I use it sometimes because it carries a greater punch (pun totally intended). 'Sex-hausted' on the other hand, is not a Britishism; I just made it up.

Now onto the triggers…

This is the prequel to a **gothic romance trilogy**. There are elements of darkness and some potential triggers including **physical abuse and kidnapping.**

SCORCHED ROSE

A dark re-telling of Beauty and the Beast

I wanted someone to take me out of my body. Ever since the fire, I'd hidden it beneath copious layers of clothing. I'd hidden my curves, my scars, my virginity. But I wasn't stupid. I knew it would be valuable to somebody. One woman's trash is another man's treasure, right?

So, I sold it all.

He paid ten times more than I asked for, but my white knight is a monster. Dark, deadly and deformed. But he is the only one to see the darkness in me. Two souls, damaged and damned. Two hearts lost in the daylight, found in the dark. I was paid to be taken out of my body, if only for one night. What I didn't expect was to be taken out of my life, forever.

Rose

I GRIPPED the paper so tightly my fingertips drained of blood. A perfect row of A's stared up from it, filling me with dread.

A presence shifted to my shoulder and a sharp intake of breath told me Remi was taking them in too.

"That. Is. Badass."

I carefully folded the paper.

"I always knew you'd rack 'em up, Rose. You're the brightest person I know."

I huffed out a sigh. "We both know these grades won't do me any favours."

Remi tucked away her collection of A's and B's and rested her hands on the tops of my arms. "Have some faith. Maybe once your mum and Jeff see them in black and white, they'll change their mind about letting you go to Uni. Surely they know it's not right to hold someone back whose grades are *that* good."

I forced the edge of my mouth to curl. "Yeah maybe." But doubt filled my mind. My mum didn't really have a say anymore. My stepfather, in the space of four years, had managed to brainwash her into believing we couldn't afford to send me to Uni.

When she first brought him home, I was happy for her. He seemed nice. Had a good job – that made a change from her usual ‘type’ – and he asked me questions, showed an interest. Again, not typical of Mum’s previous boyfriends. And most importantly, he made her happy.

So, when she announced he was moving in, I was okay with it. When she announced they were getting married, I tried really hard to be okay with it. I never once gave her reason to believe I wasn’t.

When they both signed on those fateful dotted lines, I tried even harder to be okay with it, but overnight… things changed.

“How is it at home?” Remi asked, tentatively.

I heaved my bag over my shoulder and made for the exit. “Not much has changed. Mum still spends most of her time in bed, resting. She gets a lot of migraines these days.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. And Jeff?”

“He commandeers the remote control most nights so I just grab a sandwich or something and head straight to my room.”

I turned to catch her wide-eyed expression morph quickly into a thin-lipped sympathetic one. “It sounds lonely, Rose.”

I steeled myself. For some reason, the idea of anyone knowing I was lonely was far worse than anyone thinking I was a bitch, or stupid, or fat or ugly. Or something I was far more accustomed to being: scarred. Loneliness was simply one stigma too far.

“I’m not lonely. I like my own company and I prefer studying in peace and listening to music.”

Remi breezed past me and headed straight for the road. “Do they know you applied to Uni anyway?”

The ever-present dread in my chest picked up like a choppy sea. “No. No way. Not after Jeff strictly forbid it.”

Remi faced me and narrowed her eyes. “I don’t buy that they can’t afford it, honey. He has enough money to cruise around town in a top of the range Audi.”

“His inheritance, apparently.” I shrugged. “A case for higher education isn’t a patch on the feigned grief he’s suffering over a deceased, estranged aunt.”

Remi stopped and put a hand on one of my shoulders. “But this is your future, Rose. You’ve been top of your classes the last two years. It would

be a fallacy for you to not continue your education. I mean, you want to be an architect, right?"

I nodded.

"You're not going to get there with just on-the-job experience, even if you worked for free."

I held up my hands. "I know, I know."

"So, what are you going to do?"

I sighed. "I'm going to find the money myself."

She bit back a laugh. "I'm sorry honey, but, how?"

"I don't know yet. I'll think of something."

Her shoulders dropped, resigned. "Well, whatever you do, this is not a time to be melancholy. We need to go celebrate. I've told Will and Ivy we'll meet them at The Six in thirty minutes."

I shook my shoulders and mentally dislodged the dark cloud hovering in my head. "Okay." I slid the paper into my coat pocket. "Let's go celebrate."

Remi pinned me with a grin and threw an arm around my neck, something she was able to do standing several inches taller than my meagre four foot ten.

She jostled me out of the college atrium and onto the main road. A cab rolled by with its yellow light flickering in the grey afternoon and Remi's arm shot out.

"What are you doing?" I whipped round to grab her arm. "The tube's just there."

She ignored me until the cab slowed to a standstill next to us. "My treat," she said, yanking open the door. "After getting grades like those, you at least deserve to travel to The Six in style."

I shook my head and climbed in after her.

Twenty minutes later, we pushed through the doors of the common room-come-student bar we called home. The Six was a barely refurbished former working man's club in the armpit of south London. The furniture was mismatched and frayed, the floors sticky, and the service so aloof it felt like we were trespassing on the bartenders' personal living space. But, like a well-worn sock, it was familiar, comfy and the holes were the same shape as our toes.

"Don't look left," Remi muttered over her shoulder as she walked ahead.

I kept my face focused forward but couldn't stop my eyes from flicking to the left to see what I was being warned away from. My stomach dipped. A blur of bright pink hair confirmed that Penelope Ross and her hardcore group of followers were seated in the corner by the bar.

"Great," I muttered.

"There's Will!"

I followed Remi's finger to where our friend sat with his back to the room talking to someone just out of view.

"And Ivy!" Remi reached back, grabbed my hand and tugged me through the scattered chairs and tables, as if I wanted to loiter in the peripherals of the girl whose favourite pastime was making my life even more hellish.

"Remirose!" Ivy squealed, standing as soon as she saw us approach. I'd given up trying to get her to separate our names. In her mind, Remi and I came as one package. Her thick-rimmed glasses cocked sideways as her wide arms caught us both in a group hug, knocking an empty glass onto Will's lap.

"Ivy, come on…" he moaned.

"So good to see you both," she gushed. "How did you do?"

"Not bad." Remi flopped down on a ripped leather club chair and pulled a knee up to her chin. "Rose did amazing, of course. Straight A's."

"Of course." Will stopped wiping the splashes of beer from his leg to shoot me a wink. "I expected nothing less."

I dropped my bag onto a stool. "Seeing as Remi got the cab, drinks are on me." I forced a smile. I needed every penny I could get my hands on, but I couldn't afford to live off my friends' generosity forever. And if I wasn't already on edge thinking about, well, the rest of my actual life, seeing my nemesis number one at the other side of the room had only deepened my anxiety.

Penelope Ross was a bully and she'd taken it upon herself to turn the majority of our college year against me. Thankfully, Remi, Will and Ivy had minds of their own and were slightly more discerning about the company they chose to keep. But all the other students in our year lapped up her lies and had given me a wide berth since I started the sixth form college.

"Do you want me to come help you?" Remi's eyes darted from me to the pink hair across the room.

I fixed a brave smile to my face. “I’ll be fine. Three beers and a cider coming up.”

My stomach continued to sink as I approached the bar and realised there was only one space to stand: about five feet away from Penelope’s table. I gritted my teeth and focused all my attention on the mirror at the back of the bar. *Three beers and a cider. Three beers and a cider.*

“Well, if it isn’t Scarface herself.”

I recognised the name Penelope had bestowed on me two years earlier after seeing me in the showers after gym. I transferred my eyes to the two bartenders. They were run off their feet at the sudden influx of students entering the bar.

“I can’t see any scars on her face,” one of her cronies – probably a newbie – pointed out.

I practically heard an eye roll. “Ugh, it’s not *literal*. The scars are on her back. All over her back in fact. They’re vile.”

The crony lowered her voice. “What happened? Was she hurt?”

“Fire. Rumour has it she was lusting after some dirty old man, and when he told her he wasn’t interested, she burned down half his garden.”

I swallowed. She was right about the fire, but the rest of her summary couldn’t have been further from the truth. The minute Jeff moved in and showed his true colours, I started hanging out at a neighbour’s house. He was older, fairly good-looking, somewhat reclusive. No one really knew he existed, which was great for me. I hid out in his artist’s studio, inhaling the smell of art supplies and the sound of quiet. Quiet was rare in south London. He started getting too friendly but by that time, home had become repellent and I had nowhere else to go. Sure, half his garden did burn down eventually, taking him with it. But it had nothing to do with me.

“Euwww. An old guy?”

The arched brow lifted Penelope’s voice. “Uh huh. He rejected her and paid the price. But the scars are *her* punishment.”

I flicked my gaze back to the mirror just in time to catch her glide a hand over her view of my form.

“She’s repellent. Never had a boyfriend, and doubt she’ll ever have one, not with scars like that. She’ll forever be a virgin.”

“She’s a *virgin*?” Whomever asked the question made it sound like the worst condition to ever be inflicted on a human of consenting age.

“The impurest.” Penelope lifted a cocktail to her lips and glared at my reflection.

I kept my own expression neutral but didn’t force it away. I was overcome with morbid curiosity. How did someone get off being so cruel? What gave her the right to openly criticise and lie about me like that? What made it okay? The one consolation I had was I need never cross her path in the hallowed halls of college again. Rumour had it, she was bound for St. Martin’s College to study fashion, whereas I would be taking myself as far away from London as I could go.

“What can I get you?” The bartender’s question made me jump.

“Three beers and a cider please.”

“Pints or halves?”

“Pints,” I replied, my gaze darting back to the mirror where it met with Penelope’s.

“Yeah, the only way she’ll ever get laid is if she pays someone to do it with her.”

For the first time in two years, I noticed her eyes weren’t solely brown; they were flecked with green. And right then, the green glowed like radioactive slime. I swiped a thumb across my phone screen and quickly tapped a message to Remi. *Changed my mind. Can u give me a hand?*

“Better yet, she’ll have to sell herself.”

The crony half-gasped, half-laughed, oblivious to the fact I could hear everything.

“On the street? Like a hooker?”

“Yeah, why not?” Penelope’s eyes narrowed, glee dancing on her lashes. “Or, you know, there are websites that let you sell your virginity to the highest bidder.”

“Like… V-Bay?”

A scathing laugh erupted around the table. “Exactly. Not that she’d fetch much. But something’s better than nothing when you’re that ugly and deformed.”

I took in my own reflection again. I wasn’t classically pretty but I wasn’t ugly either. My shoulder-length strawberry blonde hair carried a few curls and my pale green eyes shone occasionally like glass, in the right light. I had two large front teeth which Mum would never let me fix because she thought they made me look like Brigitte Bardot, and despite being shorter than average, my curves were reasonably well-proportioned.

Penelope's words were pure spite and wholly untrue, but that didn't mean they weren't capable of penetrating just a little of my skin. My fair face was make-up-free, unblemished and made no obvious attempt to stand out; my hair was pulled back, neat and tame. Nothing about me screamed for attention or snidery, yet somehow I attracted it anyway.

My scars had always embarrassed me, but nothing – *nothing* – made me cower and tremble like the fear of being disliked. I'd hoped the last two years would have vaccinated me against it, but the shame was as raw as ever. I sizzled with anxiety, even though Penelope was several feet away and posed no physical threat.

My shoulder warmed as Remi approached and I handed the bartender a twenty.

"Why is she glaring at you?" Remi whispered. "Did you say something to her?"

I noted the bartender's nonchalant appraisal of me as I pocketed the change, then picked up one of the pints and faced my best friend. "Not yet."

"Not y—? What are you doing?"

"Give my apologies to the others," I said, swallowing the shakiness in my voice. "I'll call you later."

I left Remi standing with three pints and a quizzical brow as I strode in the direction of Penelope's table. No matter how hard I tried, or how dedicated I was to avoiding her, I would never get this girl to like me. The narrow of her eyes widened as I approached, and her lips pursed.

She ran her eyes over me dismissively and began to speak. "Who invited y—"

The rest of her words were drowned in the downpour of beer which I dumped over her effervescent head.

A scream cut through the din of the whole bar and about two hundred faces spun in our direction. As silence descended, the only sounds to be heard were Penelope's high-pitched wail and my prized combat boots taking me out of the building for the very last time.

THE NEWS of my snapped patience had preceded me.

I could see from the look on Jeff's face as I entered the living room, he knew exactly what I'd done. He idolised Miles Ross, the owner of the local golf club – and Penelope's far richer and far more charismatic father.

"What the HELL were you thinking?"

He sprang up from the sofa and rounded on me with shaking bones. I stepped backwards. For the first time since I'd met him, I saw a thick vein bulging out from the side of his taut, shiny face.

I backed out of the room. "Where's Mum?"

"She's resting. You leave her out of this. It will only make her headache worse."

My heart sank. *Another headache.*

"Penelope Ross been goading me for two years, Jeff. I couldn't take it anymore." I said, my tone pleading.

He held his phone up and showed me the last person who'd called him: Penelope's father.

"You *humiliated* her!"

"B-but, she's been humiliating me since the start of sixth form…" I said, unable to stop my voice from quivering.

His brow darkened and I looked past him to see six empty cans of beer crunched in a pile on the coffee table.

"Look, let's talk about this in the morning," I said, holding up my hands.

"No, you're not getting out of it that easily, Rose. You just bullied my best friend's daughter. We are having this conversation NOW."

I would have laughed out loud if I wasn't half terrified. Miles Ross wouldn't have recognised Jeff if he'd stepped on him, and as for the accusation that I was the bully… It only confirmed that I wasn't going to get anywhere with this conversation. Not while Jeff was hammered, and not while Mum was upstairs sleeping off her latest migraine.

I took another step back. "I'm going to bed, Jeff. I'm tired."

"No you don't Rose. You stay right here and tell me how fucking sorry you are."

A small gasp left my mouth. "What?" He'd never been the perfect stepfather but he'd never sworn at me before.

He stepped right up to me, showering my face with the stale remnants of beer breath. "Say. You're. Sorry."

I stared back at the man I'd been forced to share a home with for the last four years. The man my mother had put her trust in to take on the father figure role I'd missed out on for most of my life. The man who'd slowly but surely driven my mother into her room with one migraine after another, while he wielded her generous sick pay around like it was pocket money. I was suddenly infused with the dull ache of injustice. If it wasn't enough that I'd lost my beloved father to a car accident when I was only eight years old… If it wasn't enough that I'd had to endure years of my mother's failed and abusive relationships in a bid to replace my father… If it wasn't enough that I'd suffered injuries of my own… Now I had to contend with a drunk stepfather who not only was completely opposed to me getting on in life, but he was also choosing some cheesy businessman over what may as well have been his own daughter.

I anchored my heels into the floor. "No," I said, forcefully. "I am not sorry. She was goading me, and she deserved it."

An eerie calmness came over him and he stepped forward again, his breaths long and controlled.

"You're fucking with people who are important to me, Rose. Say you're sorry."

"I thought *we* were important to you," I said, through gritted teeth. "Me and Mum."

Muddy brown eyes narrowed. "Your mum, maybe. You, not so much."

His words felt like a slap, pinning me back against the wall. "Wow." I breathed out, feeling the tension in my shoulders drop. Hearing the truth ripped off the Sellotape that had been holding our fake stepfather-daughter relationship together. "I can't believe you had the guts to actually say it."

He towered over me. "Are you saying I'm gutless?"

I craned my neck to look him in the eye and shrugged.

The back of his hand struck across my check, knocking my face into the wooden underside of the staircase. My skin burned with shame but the edges were tinged with something resembling triumph and relief. Finally, I didn't have to live a lie anymore. We were all operating under the pretence that we were a happy, modern family, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. I knew the second I told Mum he'd hit me, he'd be out on his arse. This was, after all, our home, not his.

A little piece of my heart broke for Mum as I climbed the stairs. She would be devastated. Not for her relationship with Jeff, but for her failure,

yet again, to pick a decent man to fill Dad's shoes. She'd be a mess for days, maybe even weeks. But if it meant getting that toxic man out of our lives, it would be worth it. I could defer university for a year while I got us back on our feet, got Mum some help for her headaches. It would all be okay. I'd have to hold on to that thought while she processed the news her husband had just hit her daughter.

I heard the TV in the living room come to life again as I pushed open the door and saw Mum's form breathing softly beneath the bedclothes. I walked round the bed and perched on the edge resting a hand on her shoulder. Slowly, she opened one eye and groaned.

"I'm sorry, Mum. Is it another bad one?"

She nodded once and closed her eye. I ran my fingers along her scalp, just as she did to me when I was small.

"I'm just going to speak, okay? You don't have to talk back, or react, or do anything that makes your headache worse. But I can't go all night without telling you this, and I think you would want to know."

She let loose another light grown which I took to mean I should go ahead.

"Jeff just hit me, Mum."

Mum's breathing stuttered and both her eyes opened. They were glazed but still managed to pierce me with feeling.

I reached for her hand and squeezed it gently. "I'm so sorry."

She continued to stare at me, unblinking.

"I didn't provoke him, Mum, I promise. Not that it matters," I added with almost a laugh.

Mum's eyes registered no emotion.

"You know how Penelope Ross has been bullying me ever since I started sixth form? And how I've just kept my head down and tried to ignore it?" I heard myself rambling and, on some level, wondered why I felt the need to explain myself. "Well, today she went too far and I… Well, I lost it."

Mum nodded her head briefly, pressing me to finish.

"I tipped my beer over her head in the middle of The Six."

When I still got no reaction, I continued. "To be honest, it was tame compared to what I'd like to do to her, but you raised me well, Mum. I know I shouldn't have given into her, but it's the last day, and I got my grades, and…"

My voice trailed off as Mum's stare began to unnerve me.

"Her father must have told Jeff because he's mad. He's been drinking too, Mum. It's been every night now for months. Anyway… he didn't like that I did that to Penelope and he just… he hit me."

Mum's stare didn't waver.

"He hit me really hard, Mum. My head hit the stairs."

I couldn't believe I was trying to get her to empathise when the words 'he hit me' should have been enough.

After several seconds of uncomfortable silence, Mum closed her eyes again and rolled away from me.

My own breath stuttered in my lungs at the realisation she might not take my side. She was my *mum*. It was impossible. Unthinkable.

I held back the tear-laden choke that threatened to erupt and patted her shoulder.

"I'll let you sleep. We can talk about it in the morning."

I was on my feet and halfway to the door when she spoke again.

"Talk about what?"

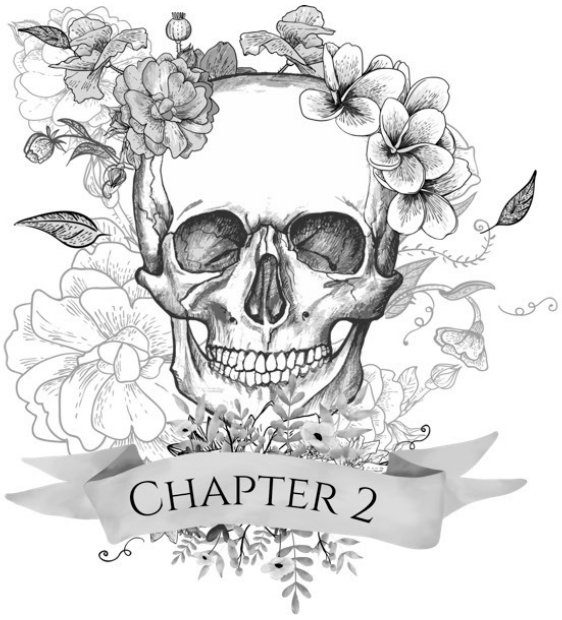
I did a double take in the dark and my chest hollowed with the onset of grief.

"Nothing," I whispered and curled my fingers around the door handle.

"Congratulations on your grades," she said, her tone lifeless.

"Thanks." I closed the door behind me and walked away.

You didn't even ask what I got.



Rose

REMI CLOSED her eyes and shook her head. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I'm selling my virginity online," I repeated.

"Um, how?" Remi was super-intelligent so I figured this was less of an actual question and more of a statement along the lines of 'what the fuckety fuck are you talking about?'

I pressed my hands on the table between us, spreading my fingers. "Don't freak out, it's all legit, all above board. I'm using a proper auction site…"

Her brows hitched so high they almost popped off her head.

"And… I've got a bidder."

Remi blinked again and sat forward, quite literally on the edge of her seat. "What?" She shook her head rigorously. "What's going on, Rose?"

I took a deep breath. A lot had happened in the last three days. Too much to allow me to pause for a second to text my best friend. And news like this couldn't be explained in 200 characters or less, which was why I'd finally insisted on meeting face-to-face when everyone else was no doubt *still* sleeping off their post-exam result hangovers.

She slurped her beer, her eyes imprisoning me so I couldn't escape.

“Okay, here goes,” I muttered, almost to myself. “When I got home from The Six the other night, Jeff hit me.”

Beer came flying out of her mouth all over the table and two hands grabbed mine.

“He what?” Her voice was softer now.

I’d rehearsed it so I could sum up the whole horrid episode in one sentence. The more I dwelled on it, the more it felt like was all my fault, and I simply couldn’t afford to allow myself to believe that. “He’d heard what I did to Penelope in The Six, and you know how he idolises her father…”

She cocked her head and shrugged.

“Well, he hit me.”

Remi pressed a hand slowly over her mouth. “What did your mum say?”

My eyebrows twitched despondently. “Nothing. She didn’t even acknowledge it. Or my grades for that matter.”

“Are you serious? You mum’s always been so protective of you… so proud.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I waved her off, not wanting to remember *those* days when they were so far removed from *these*.

“Did you try talking to her?”

I nodded. “She doesn’t want to know.”

I’d tried to talk to her again the following morning but she’d barely looked at me. She bustled around, her migraine clearly gone, too preoccupied to make time to speak to her own daughter. She’d behaved that way for a while, I reflected. For around three years if I really thought about it.

Remi’s eyes dropped to where her thumb brushed over the back of my hand. “This is why you’re selling your V-card?”

“Yeah,” I replied, quietly. “I need to get away from here. I’ve accepted a place at Edinburgh College of Art. I can get a loan to pay the fees; I just need to earn the money to pay rent. And find somewhere to live in the meantime.”

Her gaze flicked up to mine. “You have a whole summer to get through, Rose. Why don’t you stay at mine? Mum and Dad won’t mind – they adore you.”

I shook my head. “I love you for saying that Rem, but you don’t have the space, and I can’t stay around here. Not when Jeff and Penelope Ross are potentially around every corner.”

She reached out and lightly touched my cheek, noticing the bruise I’d tried to cover with makeup I rarely wore. “I can’t believe he did that to you.”

I swallowed back the ball of emotion hovering in the base of my throat. I wasn’t sad for myself; I was sad for my mum. Jeff had done something to her, pacified her. She had no energy these days, only damn migraines, and I was old enough to sort my own shit out. So that’s exactly what I was doing.

“Wait…” Remi squeezed her eyes shut then pinged them open sharply. “You said you’ve got a bidder? Someone has bid on your virginity? Back up a little. I need information. Where are you auctioning yourself off? How exactly does it work? And…” she squeezed her eyes closed before narrowing them back on me, “how the hell did you come up with that idea?”

I grinned. “Well, the last one’s easy. It was something Penelope said actually, right before I threw my pint over her head.”

“I don’t recall the two of you *conversing*.”

“No. It was something she said behind my back – that the only way I’d ever lose my virginity was if I sold it at an online auction. I wouldn’t have thought of it otherwise.”

“Well, no,” Remi said slowly. “Because you were waiting for the right person. Maybe… bookshop boy?” She grinned.

I smiled. “I was fourteen years old, Rem. I’m never going to see him again.”

She frowned. “You don’t know that. And from what you told me, you two were destined to meet.”

I leaned forward and arched a brow. “I’d only just started getting my period. I thought every good-looking boy was the one I was *destined* to meet.”

Her smile dropped. “That’s not how I remember it. How many times did you go back to that place looking for him?”

I dropped my gaze to the table and my cheeks heated. “Every day.”

“For how long?”

“A year.”

“A *year*,” she repeated. “Why?”

I looked off to the side, unable to meet her gaze, and shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.”

I sighed, defeated. “He was beautiful,” I said, wistfully. “His eyes… they just swallowed me up.” I flicked mine towards Remi and she nodded for me to continue.

“I still remember everything about that day. Everything.”

Remi clasped her hands together and rested her chin on them. “Tell me.”

My smile was timid but I never tired of telling the story.

“It was just me and Mum. We were happy. She needed to go shopping so she dropped me off at my favourite bookshop. The staff knew me there – they’d practically babysat me during all my mum’s shopping trips.” I smiled, remembering those times with such fondness my heart hurt.

I looked up at the trees swaying overhead. “You know I’ve always loved buildings and design, but my interest had really grown at that point, so I made a beeline for the design section. I found a couple of books and sat in the corner. I was planning to stay there the whole two hours, just reading and getting lost in those wonderful texts.” I darted my gaze back to Remi. “When he showed up, I was actually pissed off. I didn’t want to speak to anyone, I just wanted to read.”

“So, how did he get you to talk?” Remi smiled. She loved hearing this story as much as I loved telling it. It was like a magical fairy tale from long-forgotten times that became instantly unbelievable when life hit you over the head with a reality hammer.

“He quoted a line from the book I was reading. Which was strange because I didn’t know *anyone* who enjoyed reading architectural texts in their spare time.”

“And then what?”

I smiled. “Then he sat on the floor, leaned his back against my chair and asked me to read to him.”

She shook her head and gazed off into the distance wistfully.

It didn’t happen exactly like that, though.

I BECAME aware of a presence standing over me. I looked up to see the source of the heated gaze but it wasn't pointed at me, it was pointed at my book.

My breath stuck at the base of my throat. I'd never seen anyone so gorgeous. Maybe on TV but not in real life. He had a jaw like Luke Perry, lips like Justin Bieber, and a shadowy darkness like something out of *Stranger Things*. He was basically ever poster I had on my wall, amplified a million by his aloof, almost reluctant, existence.

"Rem Koolhas." His voice was deep, his tone surprisingly bored for someone whose face was far from boring.

I tilted my chin, determined to not be intimidated by someone clearly older, obviously educated and infinitely better bred than me. "A genius," I stated.

He snorted and turned his back, pulling down a book I had toyed with reading many times but for some reason hadn't yet.

"I'm guessing you don't agree," I said.

His behaviour was odd, as if wanted to talk, but then he didn't. Like he wanted to be friendly but then didn't really know how to be.

"You guess correctly."

He turned and leaned his weight on the bookshelf, giving me a clear view of the muscular body beneath his tight t-shirt and the thick wallet inside the pocket of his mouth-wateringly expensive jeans.

I closed the book and placed it on my knees which I'd glued together to stop them from trembling. I shouldn't have felt intimidated by a boy who couldn't have been more than a few years older than me, but good Lord I was. No one who looked that jaw-droppingly hot ever deigned to *look* at me, let alone speak to me. He peered down from the bookshelf, his dark-lashed lids lowered, making him look obscenely sexy. His strong, square jaw ground lightly as though he was considering a joke and it was totally on me. But I'd never before seen this boy and was unlikely to ever see him again so I felt uncharacteristically brave.

"Enlighten me," I said.

He folded his arms around the book he'd pulled from the shelf and assessed me with a gaze that felt like warm but illicit honey.

"Well, for a start, he's a hypocrite."

My brows hiked. "I'm not sure I buy that, but go on."

One of his brows twitched but his focus remained unnervingly steady. “He talks a lot about how preservation has contributed to a kind of collective amnesia, and that we’ve transformed historic areas into tourist hubs while conveniently ignoring buildings that represent parts of our past that make us uncomfortable.”

I sat back in my chair and tilted my head to one side. “What’s hypocritical about that?”

He pushed the book back on the shelf then fed large hands into his pockets as he regarded me with an arrogance I found weirdly, obsessively attractive.

“Because in the next breath he criticises people for not embracing change.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Aren’t they two separate arguments?”

His jaw ground as he considered my question. “No. How can you accuse people of transforming historic areas – regardless of what they are transformed to – but then claim they don’t like change?”

I chewed my lip nervously as I conceded, in silence, that he had a point.

“Plus, he’s egotistical. Goes in for every award instead of letting his art speak for itself.” His gaze roamed the bookshelves to my right, as though our conversation was beneath him.

“Maybe he finds that creating work for competitions instead of clients is freeing.”

His eyes darted back to mine in a beat and it was then I noticed how black they were.

“You don’t need a competition to create work that is freeing.”

His gaze held mine in some strange unspoken battle of wills, then he surprised me by stepping forward and holding out another book. “Now this is an artist you should listen to.”

For the first time in my life, I felt heat flood my chest. It spread like wildfire to my face. He held up *In Praise of Shadows*, by Junichiro Tanizaki. It was a book I’d been intending to read for months but hadn’t got around to it. To be honest, I’d found Tanizaki’s work almost as intimidating as this boy standing in front of me. My gaze flickered between the dark book and the even darker figure holding it out to me. His t-shirt was a steel grey which accentuated his hooded eyes. For a casual garment the cut was as sharp as his jaw, the cotton as smooth as his lips.

“Have you read it?”

His question made me jump. My already burning face became a blistering furnace. I’d been staring at his mouth for at least several seconds.

“Um, no. Not that one. It’s on my list though.”

I reached out to take the book but he held it for a few beats, staring into my eyes with unnerving intensity before releasing it.

“Once you’ve read that book, everything else will disappoint you.”

He perched on the arm of the chair adjacent to mine.

“Then why would I do that to myself?”

He answered with another question. One that stunned me.

“Don’t you want to be astounded?”

“I-I don’t know.” I could have kicked my leg off with that inane response but I had something of an image to uphold so I pretended I wasn’t a total imbecile and continued. “I mean, yes. I do want to be astounded. Doesn’t anyone?”

He scratched at the scruff appearing on his chin. “You’d be surprised.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way but you don’t seem to like… *people*.”

His mouth ticked up at one corner and small creases appeared at the edges of his eyes. “I don’t like people who don’t have depth.”

“And what, to you, constitutes depth?”

“Most people these days like everything to be handed to them on a platter. They don’t want to have to look for the good stuff or wait a second longer than they have to. They want to be able to binge it now, have it delivered the next day. They want everything they own to be on show, to air their private lives in public. They want to be in the spotlight. Just like Andy Warhol predicted, everyone will get their five minutes of fame, and boy do they want it.”

“What’s so wrong about being in the spotlight?”

“It makes shadows seem shameful.”

I swallowed. “I’m sorry?”

“Shadows aren’t something to hide, or to be ashamed of. It’s not the light that makes things beautiful, it’s the dark. We seem to have forgotten that.”

I flipped the book over, finding it suddenly captivating. Haunting and enlightening. I wanted to devour it, not only to become impressive to a modern-day beatnik like him, but to acquire all the knowledge he had. To

consume the same words and phrases, adopt the same thoughts and philosophies. It would be a few more years before I defiantly followed my own pursuit of the truth. Right then, I wanted his. His words drew mw back.

“We find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness that one thing against another creates.”

I couldn’t tear my eyes from him. He looked so nonchalant, as though profound statements left his lips effortlessly every minute of every day.

“It’s a quote from the book,” he said.

My voice was a whisper. “It’s beautiful.”

He leaned towards me, bringing his warmth into my orbit. He smelled of smoke and caramel, a dizzying combination. He patted his hand on the top of the book, his fingertips lightly brushing mine. “That’s why you have to read it.”

“I will,” I replied, my voice cracking with dryness.

He stilled over me and his gaze burned holes in my skin. “In fact, you can start now.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Do you trust me?”

Heat scorched my cheeks. I nodded.

He slid to the floor and leaned his back against my chair, his left shoulder knocking gently against my right leg, making my breath stutter in my lungs.

“Turn to page thirty-two. Start there.”

My fingers shook as I turned the pages. I read the whole chapter to him, and another, lowering my voice whenever customers ventured nearby. Each time they became aware of our presence they moved away as if sensing our unspoken need for privacy.

I was about to begin a third chapter when my mum appeared around a bookshelf.

“There you are, Rose. Minnie said you were back here.”

It was the first time in my life I wasn’t pleased to see my own mother.

Mum’s gaze darted between me and the boy, narrowing as she took in his obvious height and width and probably assuming he was way too old for me. Although, in her eyes, everyone was way too old for me. I was still her baby.

“Come on,” she said, hurriedly. “I said we’d meet Jeff for a coffee.”

Ah, Jeff. The new boyfriend. I nodded obligingly. I would go and see Jeff to appease Mum, but I wasn't planning to get to know him. Most often, the moment they heard she had a teenage daughter, they ran a mile.

I stood, reluctantly pulling away from the warmth of his arm. I felt his hot eyes follow me as I placed the books back on the shelves. I paused with my hand still attached to the one I'd been reading to him. I didn't have a lot of my own money but the way this boy had made me feel, I would spend my entire life savings on a book that might just help me relive this moment again and again.

I turned, holding the book to my chest. His expression had darkened.

"See you around, Rose."

My name dripped off the edge of his tongue like the caramel he smelled of. I so badly wanted to see him around but I wasn't stupid enough to think he meant it in *that* way. I was a child. Barely pubescent. But no one had ever made my stomach flutter before. No one had made me feel so heavy it was like I was glued to the seat.

Instead, I asked, "Do you live around here?" I'd never seen him before. I would have remembered.

He smiled, a ghost of sadness hovering behind it. "No. I don't."

The next words fell out of my mouth before I could stop them. "That's a shame."

He stared back at me, unblinking, until I couldn't take it anymore. I turned to follow Mum out of the shop when he called me back.

"If you remember one thing about us meeting, make it this: *Were it not for the shadows, there would be no beauty*. Question everything, Rose. Don't let the light blind you."

I repeated his words over and over in my head the entire way home and every day since. I would always remember that encounter as the first time I felt like the woman I was destined to become.

"ARE you really going to do it Rose? Sleep with a total stranger?"

Remi's question drew me back to the uncomfortable present prospect I was going to do exactly that.

I shrugged. “People do it all the time. Isn’t that what a one night stand is?”

She tipped her head briefly. “Well, yes, I suppose. But there tends to be some measure of attraction and lots of alcohol.”

“I’m sure I can manage the latter,” I deadpanned.

“Okay, so how does it work exactly?”

I settled into my seat. "I had to post pictures of myself on the website – all angles, scars included. Apparently, if you aren’t truthful about your appearance, you can forfeit the auction.”

“And what if you’re not a virgin?”

“Oh, you have to provide medical proof.”

"Rose," she said, her skin paling by the second. "How does one prove one hasn’t been tampered with?"

I cocked my head. "What’s with the ‘one’ all of a sudden?"

"Just answer the question, Rose."

I sighed. "Private clinics test for that sort of thing," I said with a shrug. "It was super quick, in and out, job done."

Remi stared at me for several long seconds. "Mm. Here’s hoping."

I frowned at her strange comment then blustered ahead. "So anyway, this bidder… he’s bid a lot of money for me."

"For your virginity," she repeated, as if still wrapping her head around the news.

“Yes. Do you want to know how much he’s bid for it?” I couldn’t keep the amazement out of my voice.

Remi’s eyes half-lidded, like she was running all out of patience. "Go on."

I pressed my lips together. "Guess."

“Are you kidding me? This is too much, Rose. I don’t want to play.”

I ignored her eye roll. “Go on, guess.”

She sighed and fell back in her chair throwing her arms up in the air. “I don’t know, five hundred quid.”

“Higher.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Eight hundred.”

“Higher.”

Her fingers curled round the arms of her chair. “A thousand?”

“Higher.”

“Rose, really? Okay, two thousand.”

“Higher.”

“Fuck. How much, Rose?”

“One hundred. Thousand. Pounds.”

She stared at me, motionless, her jaw slack. "What?"

“A hundred grand,” I clarified.

Remi didn’t move for nearly a minute.

"You okay Rem?"

"Um yeah.” She reached for her phone. “What is this website? Are you sure it’s not a hoax?”

“Are you saying I’m not worth a hundred grand?”

“Oh God, Rose, no. That’s not what I’m saying at all. And you’re worth more than that anyway. You’re… you’re priceless. I’m thinking maybe…”

“You’re not a virgin,” I reminded her.

She paused and chewed her lip. “This is true.”

Wringing her hands together, she frowned. “So, you’re going to go through with it?”

“If he pays up.”

She nodded, still frowning as if deep in thought. “Okay. Make sure you get the money first. Tell me exactly where and when it’s happening. Take a can of mace.”

I laughed lightly. “Okay, okay.”

“And remember, Rose…” She regarded me with a wariness bordering on fear. “This man is not your knight in shining armour, okay? More likely he’s a deranged freak who gets his rocks off to breaking in virgins and has way more money than sense.”

“Right,” I replied, forcing back the fear I’d managed to block out. “Got it. He’s no knight in shining armour.”

Then I tipped back my bottle of beer and drank it, recklessly, in one.

MY NERVES DID star jumps and somersaults as I watched the auction counter tick down. I stood up for the hundredth time in ten minutes and paced through packed cardboard boxes, swigging Pepsi and chewing gum like a six-year-old who’d just consumed a lifetime’s supply of Haribo.

I hadn’t told Mum and Jeff I was moving out. As far as they were aware, I’d forgotten the hitting incident and had moved on, being just slightly more submissive than before. I hadn’t ventured out of my room unless it was to leave the house altogether. I hadn’t tried to approach Mum again and she hadn’t attempted to approach me. It broke my heart that she wasn’t standing up for her own daughter, but if I was ever going to be able to help her, I had to help myself first. And getting far away from Middlehurst Drive was top of my list.

I swigged down more Pepsi – the caffeine helped divert my thinking away from my sorry home life towards the possibility of a future in which I’d have enough money to get the education I’d dreamed about. I glanced back at the screen. Then, as if time itself had stopped, I stared at the ticker, wondering why it hadn’t budged for an age. I tapped the track pad and nothing happened.

What?

I hit the track pad and, again, nothing happened.

Whaaaaat? Fuck, fuck, fuck. What was going on?

I tried to close the window but the screen had frozen so I forced a shutdown and hopped from foot to foot while the spinning wheel of death taunted me from the blank window.

Come on, come on.

About a year later, the screen came to life and I restarted the browser, almost chewing my lip off in the process.

The auction deadline had passed.

Was I to be the proud owner of a hundred grand or was I not?

My eyes roamed the screen, unable to focus on any one thing. Then I read the line, ‘Your auction has ended. Congratulations. Now meet your winning bidder.’

My heart lodged itself firmly in my throat as I clicked the button. It took me through to a profile page that contained no photograph and only one line of information: *Payment will be made to a holding company once contracts have been signed, then released on fulfilment. Instructions to follow.*

I scrolled to the foot of the page and felt an overwhelming sense of relief. The winning bid *was* a hundred thousand pounds. ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND POUNDS! My virginity. Sold. To the highest bidder.

The only bidder.

I closed my eyes against the inevitable ‘what’s wrong with me?’ and ‘Am I really so ugly?’ inner prodding and reminded myself that others who may have been interested would probably have seen the six figure bid and decided against it. Whoever had bid on me had put me in a league above the rest. My head swam with insatiable intrigue and dread. Who was it? And what were these instructions?

Almost immediately, a notification appeared at the top of my screen. A message had appeared in my inbox. It was from Lamont Law. I opened it and felt immediately intimidated by the very proper and complicated wording it used. I had to read over the letter three times before it made any sense.

THIS AGREEMENT (“AGREEMENT”) is entered into by both the parties described herein under as “Client” and “Provider”.

Dalziel Sebastian Edward Thorn, also described as the ‘Client’ and Rose Delilah Robinson, also described as ‘Provider’, do hereby agree to all the terms described and given below.

The term of this agreement begins immediately upon arrival at the Client’s property and shall continue until the service has been fulfilled.

THE WORDS SWAM but one line rose to the surface, higher than the rest. “*Provider will be transported to the home of the client to fulfil the purpose of this agreement. The address of the client’s home is Blackcap Hall, Warlock Mount, Isle of Crow.*”

Isle of Crow?

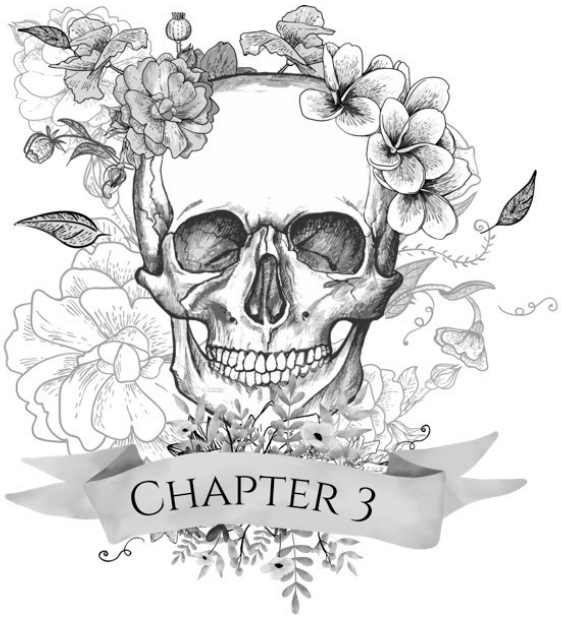
I was going to the Isle of Crow?

No one had stepped foot on that island in years. Decades. Maybe even a century. Hovering off the Scottish mainland by a few hundred miles, it was notoriously closed off from the rest of the UK. It was completely isolated and inhabited by the world’s most reclusive billionaires. Well, that figured. One of them just paid for my virginity.

Excitement and fear wrapped around the base of my spine and wound upwards until I shook with nerves.

This was it. I was going to lose my virginity to a billionaire and become rich in the process. It was too good to be true. On paper it

promised to make me, but I had a nagging feeling it might break me instead.



Rose

I WAS a mass of trembling bones when the helicopter touched down. We landed in the centre of a tarmac circle surrounded by manicured nature and not much else. There were no buildings for as far as the eye could see, only a long, black Mercedes with opaque windows and tyres that looked like they'd been polished with a cashmere brush.

An older man dressed in a slick tailored suit held out a hand and didn't flinch when mine shook uncontrollably in his grip. He didn't even bat an eyelid. He didn't say a word either as we drove across the island to the place where I was to lose my virginity to a total stranger.

The landscape passed in a blur. The only images I saw were those in my head: potential scenarios, feelings, nerves, questions. So many questions. *What does he look like? How old is he? Is he one of the infamous Isle of Crow billionaires? Does he live in a mansion? Is he single? God, I hope he's single.* It occurred to me I might be about to sleep with a serial virginity-taker. Perhaps this was his hobby. Some men like gambling or golf, maybe breaking in a virgin was that lesser-known of billionaire pastimes.

More questions flooded my head: *Where will we do it? When will we do it? Will it happen quickly or will he want to get to know me? Will I like*

it? Will it hurt?

I pressed my fingertips to my temples and squeezed my eyes closed. I needed to clear my head before I met with the man who was going to make me a woman. When I reluctantly opened them again, the car was sweeping through an enormous, foreboding set of iron gates and up a tree-lined drive that looked long enough to reach mainland Europe. My lungs filled with awe and my skin prickled. A tightening in my stomach told me if I didn't get to a loo in the next twenty minutes, I may well have had an accident on my hands.

As the trees parted, a slate grey building came into view, stretching from the ground up into the clouds. Air vacated my chest through parted lips.

"It's enormous," I whispered.

I darted my gaze to the driver whose expression didn't budge even a millimetre.

I tried again. "Is this Blackcap Hall?"

He glided the car alongside the wide stone steps leading to the main entrance. "Yes, ma'am."

I reached for the door handle but the driver's curt warning halted me. "Someone is coming for you."

I sat back slowly and waited. Sure enough, a short, quick, highly efficient-looking man strode through the doors and down the steps. I thanked the driver and stepped out of the car.

"This way please, Miss Hemingway."

"My things—" I glided an arm towards the boot of the car where my suitcase still sat.

"They will be taken straight to your rooms," the man said without looking around.

Rooms? He said *rooms?* As in, *plural?*

I hurried after him into the darkness of the hall. Instantly, the sound of my footsteps rang around the walls as my heels echoed on the polished floor. In the dim light of the chandeliers, dust floated around us, and I fell in love.

Buildings were my passion. Architects and designers, my heroes. It only took me a second after reading the contract to start researching Blackcap Hall, but astonishingly, I found nothing. I would have devoured any information I could get my hands on.

“Before we go any further,” the man said, “I need to take a few personal items from you.”

I frowned. “Personal items?”

“Yes. I need all digital devices, recording devices and your passport.”

“My passport?”

His response was to hold his face straight and his flattened palm out.

I bent down and searched through my handbag for my British passport and iPad and handed them over.

He was deadpan. “Phone.”

“What if I need to call home?”

“We’ll arrange for you to use one of ours.”

I stared at him in disbelief. He couldn’t seriously want to take my phone from me? That was my lifeline. My connection to Remi, to the university, to my mum. It held all my photos, lists and eBooks.

“I have everything on my phone,” I said, my voice pleading.

“Master’s orders.” His reply was followed by a slow blink.

With much trepidation, I handed over my phone. It would only be for two or three days, tops. I could live without it for that long. In fact, I could probably do with a digital detox, and I could always fill Remi in on my newfound womanhood when back on dry mainland.

I followed the man through the cavernous entrance hall. Darkness intensified as we entered the mouth of a corridor and followed the pale flicker of sconces along both walls. Our footsteps echoed dully as we went. Eventually, we came to an archway that reached from the floor to the high ceiling. Beyond it was a winding staircase that curled upwards. I had to tip my head back slightly to take in the narrowness of the space we stood in. It reached up hundreds of metres but couldn’t have been more than ten feet in diameter. Doors punctuated every floor, each one getting darker and smaller the further up they went.

“Where are we?” My voice was breathy as we started up the loudly creaking staircase.

“The North Tower, miss. Where you’ll be staying.”

I swallowed, almost choking on my dry throat. The damp air clung to my shivering skin and the darkness shrouded any confidence I’d mustered up to that point. Now, I was, quite frankly, shitting myself. What the hell had I been thinking? I was standing in some eerie castle that was barely on a map, preparing to meet a reclusive rich man who wanted to take the

virginity of a woman he didn’t know. Who else knew that was the reason I was there? Did the driver? The helicopter pilot? The guy showing me to my room? Sorry, *rooms*.

My cheeks heated and I focused intently on putting one foot on one step, the other foot on the next. By the time we reached halfway I was already out of breath and thankful my bags were going to find their own way to their destination.

“Not far now,” the man said, his eyes flashing at the sound of my ragged breaths.

I gripped the curling banister for extra ammunition, then the man stopped abruptly and fed a key into a door to the side of the staircase.

“After you.” He held the door open and I stepped past him into a room that couldn’t have been more starkly different to anything else I’d seen so far. Light streamed in from enormous leaded windows, silver damask wallpaper reflected the sun and the light from the imposing chandelier. An intricately carved wooden desk sat to the right, while a black velvet sofa stretched across to the left. My feet sank into thick, cosy carpet and the scents of red, pink and stone roses collided from where they overflowed from the giant vases positioned in every corner.

My heart stopped beating for a few seconds longer than I’d have liked but I couldn’t blame it. The room was breath-taking.

I twisted slowly, open-mouthed, to face the doorman, only to see the handle turn as he closed the door leaving me alone. Alone and confused.

What now? I was in heaven but for how long? And where was the man who’d paid for me?

I heard a throaty cough and jumped half out of my skin. The sound drew my gaze to a doorway at the far side of the room. My feet felt suddenly heavy as I debated whether to attempt to move them or not. My heartbeat rattled in my ears, slowly obliterating all other sound.

“Come in here, Rose.”

I sucked in a breath before forcing it out slowly. The voice, while commanding, sounded young. Maybe mid-twenties. Not what I’d expected at all. Why would a young guy with a deep, measured, confident voice need to pay someone for sex?

“Today, if you don’t mind.”

Despite the cool edge to his words, the tone wasn’t frosty, and it subdued my nerves enough to allow me to move my feet. The closer I got

to the doorway, the harder my heart pounded. I almost tiptoed over the threshold and stared into the sun-drenched room. I rubbed my eyes and squinted through the blinding rays that crossed my path.

With my feet planted firmly into more soft carpet, I focused on the silhouette seated on the edge of an enormous bed. He might have been young but I could tell from his outline he was well-built. He held himself confidently, his feet parted on the floor, his hands resting across his thighs as he looked straight ahead out of the window.

I swallowed a ball of disbelief as more details emerged through the haze. His profile was beautiful. A smooth brow tapered to a strong nose, full lips and square jaw. The shadow-black hair was short, thick and yearning to curl. I couldn't peel my gaze away.

"I trust the flight was satisfactory."

I cleared my throat. "It was, um… fine. Great. I've, um, I've never been in a helicopter before."

I winced as the last sentence tumbled out of my stupid mouth. I sounded naïve and inexperienced. Though, I supposed that's what he was paying for. My heart rattled again, reminding me why I was there. This man was going to take my virginity. I ran my gaze over his solid body again and gulped. There were undoubtedly worse ways to go.

"Did you read the contract?"

My eyes were drawn to an object he was turning over slowly in his hand as he continued to stare out of the window.

"Yes," I replied, uneasily.

"Your payment has been transferred to a neutral depository and it will be released into your personal bank account on delivery of the service."

I bristled at the mechanical, prescriptive way he was talking about one of the most meaningful things I could ever give to a person. Sure, I was devaluing myself by allowing someone to buy it from me, but it was still a precious thing, and I only had one virginity to give.

"Yes," I repeated, my voice weakened by the thought.

"There is one condition." The object kept turning, flashing light around the walls each time it caught the sun.

"A condition?" My heart raced with both trepidation and annoyance. There'd been no conditions stated in the contract.

The object stopped turning.

My heart paused its beating.

“You have to want it.”

I swallowed and felt it in my bones. “I’m sorry?”

He turned his head and my jaw fell open. The one side of his face I’d had several minutes to study was beautiful, flawless. The other was… non-existent.

He stared at me with one dark, captivating eye and one pale, translucent orb. His skin was a patchwork of threads and craters, stitch marks and cords. My heart hammered again but for different reasons. What had happened to this beautiful man to make him this way?

My gaze dropped to where my hand was pressed in shock against my chest. I curled my fingers and nestled them into my other palm while the silence threatened to overwhelm me.

A creak in the floor made me look up. He’d risen to his feet and was towering over me from several feet away. He was huge. No, forget huge. This man was gigantic. Like, inhumanly big. But alarmingly, every part of him was proportionate and sharply toned. My stomach fluttered uncontrollably.

He took a step forward and heat blossomed across my skin.

His good eye had hardened and, now out of the bright sun, that side of his face was in shadow. Just like the mood that seemed to have descended suddenly.

"You have to *want* it," he repeated.

I sucked in a gasp and watched his brow furrow. Then a breeze cooled me as he strode past.

He paused in the bedroom doorway. “Supper will be brought to your room this evening. I will check on you in the morning. Get some rest Rose."

His voice tapered off at the end, as though he’d had high hopes for something and they’d just been dashed. I was still rooted to the spot when I heard the door to the suite close behind him.

I sighed, releasing a torrent of tension.

Then a key turned in the lock.

No.

I spun around and walked briskly to the door, the sound of blood pulsing through my temples almost deafening. I turned the handle and pulled, but the door didn’t budge.

I’d been locked inside the room.

I clamped a hand to my chest again and took a step back. This couldn't be right. Could it?

I scanned the doorframe looking for some other explanation for the door refusing to open. Though it was old, it was in good condition. There was no sign of warping or sticking. I bent down and peered through the gap. A large solid bolt connected the door to its frame.

Feeling the urge to hyperventilate, I stood and focused on my breathing. In through the nose, out through the mouth.

In, out. In, out.

My fingers pressed against my temples and I scoured the room for a telephone or call button. There had to be an innocent explanation. He wouldn't have left me in a strange room, in a strange house, on a strange island, with no phone, no passport and no access to anyone.

My heart pounded, no matter how hard I tried to remain calm. I ran my hands along every surface searching for phone sockets or buzzers, but there was nothing.

I ran to the windows but they were all bolted shut. I became suddenly aware of the need for air. Very quickly, panic set in and my heart raced. I gripped a wall and slid down it, my eyes wide with fear. I pressed my hands into the carpet and closed my eyes.

In, out. In, out.

An hour or so later – at least, that's what it felt like since I had no means of telling the time – I was sitting on the large bed previously occupied by Dalziel Thorn, staring out of the window at the never-ending nothingness.

I was a million miles away when the lock turned. I leapt to my feet and raced to the door. The second it opened, I yanked it towards me and heard a male voice shout from the other side. There was a clatter of crockery, and a tray of hot food slid to the floor. I stepped over it and pushed past the man, briefly noticing his butler outfit as I made for the stairs.

I was so focused on where I put my feet, I didn't see the two giant security guards barrelling towards me until a thick arm wrapped around my neck and my feet were swept off the top step. My scream echoed around the tower before a large hand muffled my mouth, half blocking my airways. Back inside the suite I was dropped to the floor. I twisted to get a look at the two men. One had already left, while the other stood over me, scowling.

“Looks like you won’t having any dinner tonight, Miss Hemingway,” he said, with a tone of utter boredom.

“You can’t keep me locked in here. It’s imprisonment,” I rushed out.

He turned his back to me and walked through the door.

“It’s illegal!” I scrambled to my feet. “I want to leave. Now.”

I ran the three paces to the door only to feel a whoosh of air as it slammed shut. I launched for the handle but just as it turned, so did the key in the lock.

“This is AGAINST THE LAW,” I yelled. “It’s kidnapping.”

A low voice fed itself round the edge of the door. “Not on this island it isn’t.”

I staggered backwards until I felt the edge of a glass coffee table at the back of my knees. Then, fuelled with absolute rage, I spun around, lifted it off its three legs and hurled it at the wall.

Dax

IT TOOK everything in me to not slam the door so hard it shattered the eighteenth century frame. Rage levitated me and sorrow dragged me down. I clung to the banister winding round the staircase and clawed my way up two floors to the tower – to the room I had insisted I move to after the countless surgeries had failed to restore my face. I couldn't bear to see the pity in peoples' eyes, the questioning looks and the shocked intakes of breath. I didn't want to be reminded that my whole future had melted in seconds, just like everything south of my hairline. I needed to be as far away from *people* as I could get.

I did slam the door to my own room and stormed straight to the window. With my fists pounded into the wall on either side, I let out a thunderous curse, one so loud the glass shivered. I knew no one would've heard me. Father had installed state-of-the-art sound-proofing shortly after I moved into this room, to shield my mother from the heart-splitting cries I couldn't hold in. These outbursts had grown few and far between, but in moments like this, they simply couldn't be contained.

The second she'd appeared in the doorway, my entire being lit up. My gut softened, assuring me the photograph she'd posted online was not only genuine, it had done her very little justice. In the flesh she was… *perfect*.

She was demure in stature, yet bold in character – she would have to be to sell her virginity to a total stranger. Her hair shone gold with a strawberry hue and it fell over one shoulder just as I'd imagined it would. Her petite nose and delicate chin were eclipsed by almond eyes that expressed everything in one glance. And that's what reached into my ribcage and squeezed a little bit of the life out of me.

There was no mistaking the desire beneath the flutter of her lashes as she first took me in. When I turned my whole face towards her, she couldn't stand to look anymore. She averted her eyes and stared down at her hands. It was a reaction I'd almost got used to but, the fool that I was, I'd dreamed of something different with this woman. Ever since I'd found her online, I hadn't been able to get her out of my head. The second I laid eyes on the photo in her profile, my heart was taken.

I meant what I said. I didn't want to take her virginity if her heart wasn't in it. I wanted her to want it. I *needed* her to want it. Genuine desire was the one thing money couldn't buy. Yet, the sound of her sharp inhalation when I delivered my condition would haunt me forever, because nothing about it said she would ever willingly give herself to me. At least, not for less than a hundred thousand pounds.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the key. It was large, brass, and like everything oppressive in this house, highly polished.

I would bend her to me.

She would submit to my will.

And I felt serene confidence in this, because she wouldn't be going anywhere until she did.

Rose

I STARED BLANKLY at the door, my stomach growling despite the fact I didn't want to eat a thing this place tried to serve me. I assumed it was mid-morning. The dawn chorus woke me from a chequered sleep and I drifted off again for what felt like a couple of hours. I was so high up in the tower, and so far from any other part of the Hall, there were no other sounds to be heard. No trays rattling, no voices chattering, no engines running outside on the drive.

What was it he'd said? I had to *want* it. That was his condition.

How the hell he expected me to *want it* after keeping me imprisoned in a goddamned tower, I didn't know. And to think I'd found him attractive even with the scars exposed. He could screw his hundred thousand pounds. I didn't want a penny of his money, not if he needed to kidnap me to make sure I held up my end of the bargain.

I spent the rest of the day alternating between watching the door and drifting off to sleep. When the sky blackened and it became clear I wouldn't be given dinner, let alone breakfast or lunch, I climbed back into bed and stared unblinking at the ceiling until I became so bored there was no other option but to sleep.

The sound of movement in the next room jolted me awake, but terror rooted me to the mattress. Someone was inside the suite.

“Who’s there?” I forced out through croaky vocal cords.

A small figure appeared in the doorway. “Sorry miss, I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

I rubbed my eyes and narrowed them on a young girl dressed in black with a white collar and apron.

“I’ve brought you breakfast.”

“You’re a day late,” I snapped, sliding out of the bed.

She stopped mid-stride and flushed a deep red. “I don’t know anything about that, miss. I wasn’t on shift yesterday.”

I followed her to the table where she’d laid out an array of pastries, cold meats, cereals and fresh fruits. “May I pour you some fresh coffee?” she asked, holding up a metal pot.

“I trust it hasn’t been laced with arsenic.”

Her gasp made me blink. “Of course not, miss.”

I nodded curtly. “Then yes please.”

As she poured, I remembered the coffee table and glided my gaze to the back of the room. Panes of cracked glass and metal spokes had been stacked against the wall. I turned back to the maid who’d stopped pouring and was watching me with interest.

“Someone’s coming to clear it away,” she said, then smiled. “I never liked that table.”

I watched, blankly, as she poured a drop of milk into the cup – exactly as I liked it – and stirred it with a teaspoon.

I breathed in heavily. “Can you bring me my phone please?”

She shook her head and stepped away from the table. “No, miss. And even if it didn’t require that I risk my job, my life and that of my family, I wouldn’t know where to start looking for it. I expect even Master Thorn doesn’t know every nook and cranny of Blackcap Hall.”

I lifted a resigned brow. “Then can I ask to see Dalziel Thorn?”

“Of course, miss. I will pass the message on to his office.”

I was about to snort at the ridiculousness of the situation but thought better of it. I should have been thinking about befriending this girl. She could be the key to getting me out of this place.

I swallowed back everything my bitter heart wanted to say, and instead thanked her. I followed her to the door, half-planning to push my way out

again but the second it opened, my eyes connected with the menacing glare of another security guard. The maid turned and gave me an apologetic smile before pulling the door closed.

Ka-clunk.

And there went the lock.

Dax

I DIDN'T BOTHER KNOCKING before I unlocked the door. Not that it mattered. I had men everywhere; there was no way she'd get out of the tower, let alone the house. I stepped into the room and a fluttering sensation picked up in my belly. God knows what it was but it made me almost nauseous. She appeared immediately, her feet planted and her arms stiff as if bracing for an attack, and she was still wearing the outfit she arrived in.

"Have you even showered?" The question was well-intentioned; I wanted her to feel at home here. But coupled with the grimace I naturally imparted, it sounded judgmental.

Her eyes bugged. "Yes, I've showered!"

"Then why are you still wearing those clothes?"

She chewed on her lip. "Because… I only packed for three days and I don't particularly want to lounge about a prison in an evening gown."

I almost snorted at her comment. She knew nothing of being imprisoned. But her following words fizzed in my stomach. "You brought an evening gown?"

"I didn't know what to expect," she said, then laughed bitterly. "I' hoped it might be treated as a special occasion."

“I’ll have some clothes delivered for you.”

She planted her hands on her hips. “Or… you could just give me back my stuff and let me leave.”

I cocked my head to one side. “Why? Don’t you want your money?”

“Not if it means becoming your prisoner to get it,” she snapped. “That wasn’t in the contract. Now I know why you bid so much money for me. It wasn’t just my virginity you wanted, was it? You wanted a pet.”

My chest constricted painfully, propelling me across the room. Her face paled as I approached but she didn’t back away. “You’re comparing yourself to an *animal*?”

She tilted her chin upwards and glared at me. “Well, isn’t this what happens to animals? People keep them in cages and train them to submit?”

My fists clenched and unclenched without command. “I’m not training you to do anything.”

“But you’re not denying you’ve thrown me in a damn cage, are you? You think so little of me you’re happy to lock me in here and not feed me for twenty-four hours. That’s downright abuse.”

My voice trembled, unrecognisably. “Don’t talk to me about thinking so little of yourself. You’re the one who put yourself up for sale.”

“No…” She had the guts to poke a sharp fingernail into my chest, but instead of breaking the entire hand, which was what I’d normally do, I craved the pain. “I put my *virginity* up for sale, not *me*. But you don’t seem to have any intention of taking it, so you should just LET…” *Poke*. “ME…” *Poke*. “GO!” *Poke*.

I snatched her finger and held it tight as her eyes darted between our hands and my face. Chemistry combusted through my veins at the feel of her skin on mine, disorientating me. My rasping breaths competed with hers, both being the only sounds in the room. Her lips parted for a second, then she pulled back her hand.

“I’m not letting you go until you deliver what you agreed to,” I said, forcing my voice to sound less menacing and more human.

“Then take it. Now.”

I opened my mouth to reiterate my condition of purchase but her quick movements distracted me. She pushed her jeans down her legs and stepped out of them, then pulled the t-shirt over her head until she was standing in front of me wearing only a bra and pants. My errant gaze swept over her

and the sight of such flawless skin and the sweet curve of her belly and hips took my breath away.

"Come on," she demanded, although the conviction had left her voice. "Let's get it over with."

I couldn't speak. It had been a long time since a woman had stood before me almost naked, and never before had one so perfect bared herself to me.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot." She pouted and rolled her eyes. "I *want* it."

Fury exploded in my chest and before I could stop myself, her back hit the wall, her wrists were captured in mine, and my mouth was so close to hers I could taste the soft hairs lining her top lip. Seconds passed while my heaving chest met hers. Her eyes narrowed like a cat's and she stared at me, unblinking. My thumb brushed over her pulse and felt it raging beneath the delicate skin. I had to hand it to her, she was afraid but carrying it off as defiance.

I breathed her in, all floral-scented deliciousness of her, one last time. "Don't give up the day job, Rose," I growled. "You're a fucking *shit* actress." Then I pushed myself off the wall and stepped back.

She lowered her arms, keeping her eyes on me. That was when I noticed her chin trembling. In any normal human, that should have inspired regret, shame, guilt. But I wasn't a normal human. My skin had become thickened by scars and my purpose in life was constricted to selfish greed and nothing more. It was only through the privilege of family wealth I had more money than I knew how to handle. If I hadn't had that, I would've ended my life before now. What was the point of living with the physical evidence of worthlessness when there was no money to suggest otherwise?

Her shoulders suddenly dropped, as though she was finally seeing the futility of her resistance. "How am I supposed to get into the part when you lock me in here all alone all day? If you want me to want you, you have to let me get to know you. I can't just turn it on like a light switch." She wrapped her arms around her middle.

I drew my gaze away and walked into the bathroom. From a cupboard I pulled out a freshly laundered bathrobe and carried it back out to the suite. Her gaze flitted about as I neared but softened when I opened the robe. She slid her arms through the sleeves and allowed me to tie the belt. My

fingers brushed the cotton covering the side of her breast and we both froze.

I stood up straight. “What do you need Rose?”

She shrugged and glanced at the floor. “I don’t know… a date?”

Her awkwardness almost matched my own.

“I don’t do dates.”

She flicked her face back to mine. “And I don’t do desire-on-demand. Guess we’re going to have to compromise somewhere.”

I watched her as I took steadying breaths. “Dinner then. Here at the Hall.”

She brightened slightly. “When?”

I closed my eyes against the discomfort of having to actually spend time with another person. “This evening,” I said, with all the joy of an arachnophobe being forced into a tank of spiders.

I turned away and walked to the door, feeling her curious gaze on my back. “Clothes will be delivered,” I said, without turning round.

Then I walked out, locking the door behind me.

Rose

I LAID on the bed and stared out of the window, paralysed with boredom, until a faint knock at the door made my heart thump. I reached for the bathrobe Dalziel had wrapped around me and threw it on just in time to see the door to my suite open and the maid from my second day step inside. This time though, she had company.

"A delivery for you, miss."

I hugged the robe around myself as two men entered wheeling a covered clothes rack into the room. I stepped back to let them pass through to the bedroom. Neither one of them batted an eyelid at my clothes – underwear included – strewn across the floor. Without speaking, they removed the enclosure, revealing about twenty suit bags. Deftly, they unzipped each one and hung the garments in my cavernous wardrobe. They worked so quickly, I couldn't identify what each item was but my heart fluttered at the sight of such beautiful fabrics, all in shades and tones that would complement my notoriously clashy colouring. Creams, corals and the palest of greens swayed together like a perfect sunset over a crystal sea.

I waited as the men packed up the rail and suit bags and left without any acknowledgement I was even there, then I turned to the maid.

“Master Thorn has invited you to dine with him downstairs,” she said, averting her gaze from my bathrobe.

My eyebrows shot up. “Now?”

“In one hour.” She glanced up shyly. “I’ll be waiting for you outside.”

As soon as she left, I opened the wardrobe and rifled through the clothes, both loving the textures and hating the fact I did.

There were six day dresses, each with different hems, cuts and necklines; four evening gowns in pale grey, sand, peach and coral; four stunning shirts and blouses; four pairs of trousers – two smart and two casual; and two hanging bags filled with nightwear and lingerie. I swallowed as I laid each set on the bed. My eyes were immediately drawn to a pale pink balconette bra made of the finest, softest lace, and matching pants. I caressed them before looking back to the gowns. *What should I wear?*

I did a mental inventory of the scenario. I was about to have dinner in a grand stately home with a handsome but intensely unlikeable stranger who was paying for my virginity but holding me captive until I was ready to deliver it wholeheartedly. Remi was going to have a conniption.

I selected a floor-length crepe slip in pale pink to match the underwear. It shamelessly exposed the first degree burn scar across my back. Then the realisation hit me like a falling stack of bricks. This was why he’d chosen me. I was as damaged as he was. The only difference was I had the ability to hide my own scars. Dalziel couldn’t hide his from anyone. Forget wearing his heart on his sleeve, Dalziel Thorn wore his history on the side of his face.

I wondered again what had happened to him. I knew enough about scars to be certain those were not birth marks. Those had been inflicted. It was clear to me he had too much pride and – dare I admit it – *spirit* to do that to himself. Someone had done it *to* him. But who? And why? And were they still in his life? I was likely I would never know.

I freshened up in the bathroom, fastened my hair in a loose knot and freed a few strands around my face. I kept my make-up minimal, only applying a little blush to my cheeks and gloss to my lips.

“You look beautiful, miss.” The maid’s eyes widened for a brief moment before she glanced away again timidly. The presence of two solidly built security oafs was unmissable and I felt horribly self-conscious as we descended the stairs.

We walked through a series of dimly lit corridors until we reached a dark, slate-coloured door that was almost the size of my house back home. The maid pushed it open and led me into an enormous room with unfeasibly high ceilings peppered with ornate mouldings. The walls were edged with black wood panelling and beautiful wallpaper depicting all the flora and fauna, nature and wildlife I'd read could be found on the Isle of Crow. My breath caught in my throat as I took it all in.

"Take a seat, miss." The maid's words cut through my reverie and I dropped my gaze to a table in the centre of the room. It was long and thin with a chair at each end. In one of them sat Dalziel, but I'd known that already. I'd felt the heat of his gaze the second I entered the room. Strangely, I didn't feel the need to look back at him. Something about his presence felt permanent. He'd still be there to see when I eventually looked his way.

He sat back in a chair, casually, like he owned the place – which he practically did – and his pale eye narrowed on me. "You heard her. Take a seat."

He glanced at the maid and jerked his head. His dismissal of her tasted sour in my mouth.

I frowned. "You seriously want me to sit all the way down here?"

He crossed a leg over his knee, the corner of his mouth quirking slightly. "Unless you want to sit on the floor."

"I know how to move a chair," I said with a pout. "But you're supposed to be the gentleman here."

His good brow arched. "And I thought I'd paid for a lady. What's wrong with sitting at the end of the table?"

"I thought the whole idea was for me to get to know you. I can hardly do that when you're a dot in the distance."

He chewed the side of his mouth while his good eye creased in one corner. After a minute or two of stand-off, he got to his feet and walked lazily to the other end of the table, holding my gaze the entire time. He lifted the chair with one hand and carried it to the opposite end, placing it adjacent to his.

"Better?" he deadpanned.

I blew a strand of hair from my face and squared my shoulders. "Much. Thank you."

His heated gaze followed me to the chair. I went to pull it out to sit but it wouldn't budge. I tried two hands and it moved half an inch. I released my grip, feeling the skin across my cheekbones parch. *He'd lifted it one-handed with the ease and grace of a swan.*

"Need some help?" The smirk wasn't visible on his face but was overwhelmingly present in his voice.

I took a deep breath and steeled myself. "Yes please."

He stood and pulled out the chair like it weighed no more than a silver spoon. I chewed my lip and sat, transferring my focus to the table.

As if they'd been standing right outside waiting, a team of waiters trotted into the room holding trays aloft. Without making any eye contact with either of us, they bent low and served a range of delicacies onto the thinnest china plates I'd ever seen. I stared at the food, hoping saliva wasn't dribbling down my chin, and continued to even when the room was quiet again.

Dalziel lifted his knife and fork then paused. His presence was so formidable, his breathing shifted the energy around us both, untethering me.

"I do hope you're not waiting for me to say grace." The sarcasm in his voice was thick. "It's been a long, *long* time since God walked these halls."

I looked up at both sides of his face. Neither of them were bluffing.

I speared a bean and bit into it. He drove a fork into a piece of steak and fed it into his mouth. It was the first time I was able to truly study his lips. Only the right corner had been seared. The remaining skin was soft and unblemished. He watched me closely as I ate, the silence strangely comforting. We both cleared our plates and lowered our cutlery.

"This is a beautiful room," I said, glancing around.

He breathed deeply beside me. "I don't do small talk, Rose," he said, sharply. "Either say something meaningful or say nothing at all."

I glared at him. "Fine. Does asking you a question count as meaningful?"

His good eyebrow curved into a perfect arch. "It depends on the question."

"Why did you pay so much for me?"

His eyes widened for a beat of a second then resumed their nonchalant normality. "I didn't want to be outbid. When I see something I want, I do

everything in my power to get it."

His confession knocked the wind from my chest so I reached for the glass of wine I'd sworn I wouldn't touch and drank half of it.

"In the short time I spent researching the auction site, I didn't see any bid go above ten thousand. You could have bid twelve thousand and still won."

He brought his own wine glass to his lips. "Where's the fun in that? Besides, you don't know that for sure."

"Most bids I saw settled at a couple of thousand, and even then, the girls were beautiful – like supermodels."

He lowered his glass slowly and placed it on the table with highly controlled care, then his head rotated towards me. "Are you saying you're not worth a hundred thousand pounds?"

I swallowed, unnerved by the sudden depth of his voice. "I don't really think you can put a price on anyone.

"But you put yourself up for sale."

"Because I need the money," I said, folding my arms.

The door opened and more waiters appeared. I felt his gaze scorch my skin as we waited for the plates to be removed and a dessert course to be delivered.

As soon as the door closed, he spoke again. "Why do you need money?"

I took a deep breath. "I want to go to university and unfortunately education doesn't come cheap."

"Your parents can't pay for you?" He lifted a fork and dug into a pot of rosemary chocolate fondant.

I looked away and tried to find something distracting to focus on.

"They could. They just choose not to. Besides, I need to get myself another place to live, after my stepfather hit me…"

The clatter of a fork dropping onto a china plate made me jump, but the look on his face made me fearful. "He… *what*?"

I spoke slowly. "His best friend's daughter was a bully. I fought back, Jeff didn't like it, he hit me."

His pause lingered until my pulse throbbed in my ears.

"So, you don't have anywhere to live?"

I shook my head. "No. But it's fine. I'll stay with friends until I get a university place." I picked up my own fork hoping to draw a line under the

topic.

"Which friends?"

I almost spat out the fondant but swallowed it instead, feeling a large chocolatey lump ease it's way too slowly down my throat. I took another few mouthfuls of wine. It really was delicious. "College friends," I replied, eventually. "Why do you want to know?"

"Are they trustworthy?"

"Yes…" My voice had risen an octave. "Of course they are."

He didn't seem satisfied with my answer as he pushed away his plate, eyeing me the whole time.

"I'll pay for you to stay in a hotel until you find a place to live."

I gasped. "What? But that's ridiculous. You don't even know me, and after, you know, we do the thing I came here to do, I'll be out of your life forever. You'll never see me again."

For a second, he looked as though *I'd* slapped *him*, but the mirage was quickly replaced by a scowl. "That's irrelevant."

"I don't need a sugar daddy."

He half-laughed. "I'm not old enough to be your sugar daddy."

"Age is *irrelevant*," I said, throwing his own words back at him. "I don't need a man to take care of me."

"Maybe not. But I won't take your virginity then send you back to the mainland homeless."

"It won't be your problem. I'm nobody's problem." I heaved out a breath and looked away. "It's pointless talking about it anyway. We should be discussing what I came here for."

"What is there to discuss?"

I flicked my eyes back to him. "When are we going to do it?"

"When you're ready."

"I'm ready now." My voice was low but didn't conceal the tremble in my words.

He shook his head. "No, you're not. You said you wanted to get to know me. So, here I am. Get to know me."

I felt hot blood rush into my cheeks. "Fine. What happened to your face?"

His jaw ticked to one side. "Too soon."

My heart sank. "When will it not be too soon? You're planning on keeping me here until you feel it's the right time to tell me what

happened?”

“You’re the one who thinks you need to know in order to get to know me.”

“When will you tell me?”

“When I’m ready.” His eyes blackened and even his clear one filled with shadow.

I looked around as my mind scrambled for things to talk about, questions to ask. I raised my eyes to the ceiling, noticing for the first time a chandelier that was adorned with thousands of crystals. “Is this a… ballroom?”

I felt his gaze roam every angle of my face. “Yes.”

“Well then, maybe we should dance.”

“Sure,” he replied, lifting his wine glass again.

“I’m being serious.” I turned to face him. “I can’t be in a ballroom for the first – probably *only* – time in my life and not dance. What kind of a date would that be?”

“I don’t dance.”

I had reached the end of my tether and then some. “Then let me dance with one of your security men,” I said with a huff. “There are enough of them around the place and there’d be even less chance of me escaping.”

He watched the last of his wine dance in the glass before tipping it back. “You won’t be going anywhere, Rose.”

I thinned my lips, frustration bubbling up inside me, then he snapped his fingers.

Immediately, another waiter appeared and ran to Dalziel’s side. He bent low and Dalziel whispered something in his ear. The waiter stood, nodded and walked briskly out of the room. In seconds, the sound of a harp filled the enormous room and the first notes of a classical piece I vaguely recognised tripped off the walls.

Breathless, I looked up to see Dalziel already on his feet holding out a hand. I took it, blinking at the same surge of heat that had infused me when he grabbed my finger. He led me away from the table and turned me to face him. He threaded his right arm slowly beneath my left until his fingers lightly touched the scarred skin over my shoulder blade. I held my breath and watched his eyes for any reaction but there was none. Only a determined focus on some distance point beyond me.

I rested my arm along his and my palm on his shoulder. I didn't need to apply any pressure to feel the thick muscle tissue beneath his tux jacket. It was so full and solid, I was surprised his body was able to breathe. He took my right hand in his left and raised it in the starting position, then the harp picked up again. It sounded like raindrops on a summer's day and so romantic my chest hummed with pain.

He moved me with disarming gentleness around the room, holding me lightly, applying pressure when my rusty steps threatened to throw us off course. As was customary, we faced in opposite directions, but after a minute or two I couldn't resist turning to look at him.

"You're a good dancer," I said, working to keep the surprise out of my voice.

"What did I say about small talk?" he replied.

I swallowed, annoyed I hadn't thought of anything more inspired to say. He led me through a lap of the room while the music danced around us.

"What made you choose this piece?"

I thought I felt his arm tense beneath mine but that couldn't have been right. The man was control personified.

"It's my favourite." He guided me more smoothly through a bend, his fingers lightly dusting my spine.

I suddenly wanted to know everything about it. "What is it called?"

"It's the Waltz of the Flowers by Tchaikovsky."

"I'm sure I've heard it before," I said, wracking my brains to place it.

I felt his shoulder ease slightly and there was a softness to his voice. "The Nutcracker Suite."

"That's it." I grinned.

We moved another lap around the room then he finally turned his head. "It's believed Tchaikovsky dedicated this piece to his favourite rose." His eyes landed on mine briefly.

My heart seemed to jam inside my chest, stuttering with confusion. There was no way on earth I felt anything for this man. He'd kidnapped me and was holding me captive against my wishes. He'd agreed to sleep with me once in return for payment, but was even withholding that, and for what? Because he needed to feel *wanted*? I should have been hating him, despising him, finding any way I could to escape, but those feelings hadn't

surfaced. It didn't make any sense. I was in shock – that was the only explanation. Shock had rendered me incapable of seeing a way out.

The crepe skirt flowed around my ankles as we moved, but the luxuriousness of it tasted bitter. I had to get out of there and back to normality, money or no money.

"I'm ready, Dalziel," I whispered.

He drew us to a standstill and lowered his gaze to me. "For what?"

"I'm ready for you to take my virginity."

His nostrils flared slightly as he considered my words and the final bars of the music drew the waltz to a close.

Finally, he shook his head once. "No, you're not."

I withdrew my arms angrily. "Isn't it up to me to decide?"

A vein on the good side of his face throbbed. "NO," he thundered, suddenly. "I'm the one paying. I'm the one who gets to decide if you're ready or not."

Rage bubbled up through my chest. "Then at least tell me what the criteria is for being ready, since you claim to know so much about me."

He closed the small space between us, bringing his steel chest to mine. I had to crane my neck to maintain eye contact. "I already told you." His voice rumbled with conviction. "You have to want it."

"I do want it," I said through gritted teeth.

"No, you don't. Not yet."

"Yes. I. *Do*."

My hands clenched into fists at my sides. I was incandescent with frustration.

His eyes narrowed. "You're lying."

Feeling utterly helpless, I growled and stamped a foot. "Stop telling me what I'm doing and what I'm feeling. For God's sake, I want to… to sleep with you. Okay? That's what I'm here for and I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

He lifted his fingers to my jaw and I flinched, then instantly regretted it. Now he suspected I was bluffing. His fingers curled into my skin and he moved my face with surprising gentleness from side to side. "You have to want it."

"I know," I whispered. "I do."

Holding my face still with one hand, he lifted my dress with the other. It happened too fast for me to wonder what he was doing. Then I felt his

rough fingers shove inside my pink lace pants. My eyes stretched wide and I jerked my head against his tightening grip. His eyes might have been on mine but his focus was on the space between my thighs. He drove a finger into the shallow of my opening. I knew it was bone dry.

He whipped his hand back and released me with a scowl. “You’re a liar.”

My mouth dropped open and I walked backwards, hugging my arms around myself. After a few seconds, I cleared my throat.

“I can’t just turn it on,” I said, glaring at him. “You have to put some effort in.”

When he didn’t respond, I continued. “I’m no expert but I’m pretty sure it takes more than a quick dinner and dance to make a girl ready for sex. You have to work for it.”

He arched a sceptical brow. “Enlighten me.”

“Make me feel special. Touch me. Kiss me.” My pitch rose with every demand.

His Adam’s apple moved as he swallowed. “You want me to kiss you?”

Blood surged into my cheeks and I dropped my gaze to the floor.

Time stopped and all I could hear were ragged breaths that seemed to get louder in the empty, cavernous room. Long agonising seconds passed before he brushed past me and stalked to the door. The moment he left the room I had to pinch the bridge of my nose.

There was no way – no way on God’s earth – I was going to cry for this man.

Dax

I STORMED BACK into the main hall and past the central staircase, heading towards the North Tower: my retreat. Anger vibrated through my legs more with each step. What had I expected? Of course she was lying. She was doing whatever it took to get her money and get out of there. She didn't find me attractive in any way, shape or form. I'd stupidly allowed myself, with each sidelong glance and each spark I felt when we touched, to gather hope. I was a stupid fucking idiot. What normal woman – let alone one with a brain like a shard of glass and looks that could command an army – would ever be interested in someone like me?

I was damaged. Deformed and ugly. A beast.

Sure, I was rich. But as it turned out, that didn't matter. In fact, my wealth had become my only allure.

I couldn't put too much blame on myself for dreaming. Guiding that exquisite woman around the dance floor to the most ingenious piece of music ever written was possibly the highlight of my life so far. My heart swelled under the weight of her undivided attention. She listened to the few words I said as though she actually heard them. She rose to the challenge of asking meaningful questions, even though I refused to answer.

I wasn’t ready to tell her what had happened. I wasn’t ready to tell anyone. Even my family. My father was the strongest man I knew but knowing the truth about where my scars came from would break his heart.

My head was full of the sight of her lips asking me to kiss her, the sound of her breath as we skated across the floor. So, when a large figure stepped out in front of me, almost knocking me out cold, I swore like a sailor with a foghorn.

“Jeez, Dax! Look where you’re going.”

My cousin, Rupert, middle son of my father’s brother Sinclair, stared at me, his face fixed in shocked annoyance.

“What the fuck?” I snapped. “Where are you going this time of night?”

He frowned. “I should be the one asking you. I haven’t seen you outside the North Tower in months. If I hadn’t been to visit you on the regular, then I’m not sure I’d recognise you.”

“I just went for a walk.” I shoved my hands in my trouser pockets.

“Dressed in a tux?”

Fuck. I forgot about that. “Just taking it for a spin.”

“You’re taking a tux for a spin?” His cocked brow told me he was not buying my bullshit. “Now look what you’ve done. You’ve got me all intrigued. I’m not going to leave you alone until you tell me where you’ve been.”

I huffed out a breath. “Fine. I’ve been at dinner.”

His eyes widened. “With whom?”

“No one you know.” Shit. If I could have kicked myself without him seeing, I would have done so several times.

“This is the Isle of Crow, Dax. Everyone knows everyone.” He brought himself closer and lowered his voice. “What are you hiding?”

My eyes searched his for any suggestion he might do something underhand with whatever information I gave him – that was usually the way with my family – but all I saw was genuine interest, laced with a little concern. Because that’s how people looked at me now. With concern. Concern for my body, concern for my mental health, concern for my lonely heart.

I decided to err on the side of caution. “It was Gerry’s birthday.”

Rupert bit back a smile. “Gerry? Your security guy? You two a thing?”

I punched his arm but he didn’t even wince. The man was made of steel. I thought I was a battle-axe in the weights room but I was nothing

compared to Rupert.

"No. But even if we were, I wouldn't hide it. Anyway, he's been working like a damn trojan these last few weeks and I thought he deserved some kind of recognition."

"Why didn't you just buy dinner for him and his partner?"

I felt the back of my neck start to sweat. Rupert wasn't buying my story and was gleefully rejoicing in making this more difficult than it needed to be.

"Because… I wanted to show some interest in him. Isn't that what good bosses do?"

Rupert snorted. "In any other world but this one."

For a few seconds we shared a look of recognition, a silent acknowledgement of the fucked-up family and fucked-up way of life we'd all been raised in.

He pushed himself off the wall. "Yeah, well, I'll let you get on."

"Sure," I replied, feeling my nerve endings sigh with relief.

"You look good, cuz," he said, as I walked past. "You should do more stuff that requires a tux."

I glared at him. I didn't look *good*. I looked like a giant skin graft in a custom suit.

"Goodnight Rupert," I bit out, trying not to feel his pitying eyes on my back as I walked away.

I DIDN'T WANT to wake up. My dreams had been filled with visions of Rose. Even in the depths of sleep I could feel her touch on my shoulder and the weight of her arm along mine. Our fingers were threaded together as we glided around the ballroom in a never-ending waltz. There was no conversation, only touch. Conversation seemed too lowly a thing to be permitted to intercept our little slice of time. But the sensation of touch deepened until we were moulded together as one. Her smile became mine. My body became hers.

When I reluctantly opened my eyes, the feeling stayed with me. Rose was more than just some girl who wanted to sell her virginity. She was a goddess who was only still in this tower because I'd imprisoned her.

I growled low and pushed myself out of bed into the shower. It was still early but I didn't want to wait until a supposedly respectable hour. I wanted to see Rose now. It didn't matter that a sweep of her gaze made me feel as unworthy as I was, or that her thinly veiled hatred was impossible for her to disguise. I just wanted to bask a little in her proximity. I'd never have a woman like Rose in my captivity again, so I wasn't going to waste another minute.

Freshly showered, I messaged Harrod. Ten minutes of pacing the room later, a knock came at the door. I opened it to find my butler standing at the other side, his head turned and brow raised in a look that said, 'are you sure about this?'

"Relax, Harrod." I took the tray from him and strode past and down the stairs two floors to the guest room.

One of my two security men unlocked the door for me, seeing as I had no hands free.

Her face was bright as the door revealed her, then it dimmed when she set eyes on me. Even the sight of a silver tray laden with French pastries, sliced fruits, cold meats and freshly brewed coffee failed to permeate her resentful exterior.

The door had swung wide to let me in, then the weight drew it closed with a loud clunk.

"I wasn't expecting you," she said in a bored tone, gesturing to the robe she was wrapped in. "If you give me a minute, I'll change."

"Don't change on my account." I wouldn't have minded staring at the gap in her robe wondering what she tasted like beneath it. "Only if it makes you feel more comfortable."

She held my gaze for longer than I expected, her pupils roaming my face as if looking for some hint of deception. "I think I would feel more comfortable." Her voice cracked as she said the words.

I waited in the main suite while she headed to the bedroom to change. When she returned, I decided I liked floral day dresses way more than half-open bathrobes. I silently thanked Madame Galette, our family dressmaker. She hadn't made all the dresses that had been delivered to Rose – she wouldn't have had enough time to create garments to my standard – but she'd handmade this one, I could tell. It had all the signature details I'd come to recognise.

It had a conservative neckline that cleverly and subtly exposed the collar bone, a hint of lace beneath the hem of the skirt, a sharpness to the shoulder. In it, Rose looked like summer itself. Floral, warm… virginal.

"I brought breakfast." The words came out quickly in an attempt to conceal the heat crawling through my pelvis.

Her long, pale eyelashes flicked up at me. "Ever the gentleman." She pulled out a chair, ignoring the one I'd already held out for her, and sat.

I settled opposite her, filling the small chair with my bulk. At six foot three and two hundred and twenty pounds, I wasn't made for parlour chairs. I caught her biting back a small smile at my obvious discomfort.

"Why breakfast?"

Her question surprised me.

"What do you mean, 'why breakfast'? Why not breakfast?"

She placed her hands in her lap and cocked her head to one side. "The way you marched out of the ballroom last night, without even a glance over your shoulder, I honestly expected to have been sent packing on a boat by now."

I lifted the cloche, revealing a plate of warm croissants, and took one. I sliced it open then stroked a butter knife across its spongy flesh. "Didn't you hear what I said, Rose?" I dipped the knife into a small pot of freshly cooked jam. It was my favourite, so Chef always made sure he had a small batch on the hob. I streaked it over the open croissant then cut it into small pieces. "You're not going anywhere."

"Until you take my virginity," she clarified.

I placed the knife down and gave her my full focus. "Yes."

"Which you will only do when you're satisfied that I want it."

I passed the plate to her. "That's correct. Now, eat."

"What is this?" she asked, without glancing down.

"It's strawberry jam made with rose water. This morning in fact." I poured two cups of coffee and lifted the jug of cream along with a questioning brow.

"Yes please." She nodded. "And you're eating with me, why?"

I shrugged. "You said you wanted to get to know me better, so here I am."

"I was getting to know you just fine last night before you stormed out on me."

I bristled. “I didn’t storm out on you. In my mind, the conversation had ended.”

“I’m guessing conversation isn’t your strong point.”

“Maybe not, but I don’t have much call for it these days.”

“Don’t you work?” She popped a piece of croissant into her mouth, chewed briefly, then stopped. My eyes were glued to her lips. They were the same colour as the jam. Slowly, she resumed chewing, swallowed, then popped another piece into mouth.

“Yes, I work. But in my line of work, not a lot of conversation is needed. I have people do that for me.”

She curved an eyebrow. “You have people converse for you? Oh my, how the rich live.” She nodded to my empty plate. “Aren’t you eating?”

I reluctantly reached for a slice of toast. The thought of sitting in front of this beauty as she watched my deformed face consume food made me feel physically sick.

“On the contrary, in my experience most rich people love the sound of their own voice.” I spread butter and jam on my toast and took a small bite.

“So, what do you do?” she asked, brightly.

Every bite felt exaggerated, as though the entire building could see and hear the motion of my chewing. I swallowed and reached for a napkin. “I work in real estate.”

“As in, you buy and sell buildings?”

“Buy, sell, flip, break up, manage.”

“Break up?” She popped the last piece of croissant in her mouth and I reached for another, this time going a little heavier on the jam.

“Yes. If a building is in the right location and the market demands it, I will break it up into smaller dwellings, then sell or rent them out.”

She stilled for a few seconds. “But, what about the character? If you break up a beautiful six storey town house into apartments, it takes away the building’s character.”

“Not the way I do it.” I cut the second croissant into pieces then handed it to her.

“So, how do you do it?”

I narrowed my eyes. “You really want to know?”

She nodded quickly. “I want to be an architect someday, so forgive me for wanting to geek out on this stuff.”

My heart stuttered. “You want to be an architect?”

“Yes. Eventually. I love interior design too, so I’m hoping to get some part time work doing that while I study.”

My whole torso stiffened, bracing around my heart. This woman was becoming more and more perfect with every damn breath. Not only was she scarred like me, but she was also sharp, gorgeous and shared the same passion I had for buildings.

“If things were different, I’d be using my architecture degrees too.”

“You’re qualified?” Her eyelids popped open. “Why don’t you practice?”

I shook my head lightly, enamoured at the sight of her eating food I’d prepared for her. “In my family, art is deemed somewhat… frivolous. Why spend my days drawing pretty pictures of houses when I could be charging barely affordable rents to people who want to live in those we already own?” I glanced at the table, not even able to smile off the bitterness in my tone. “We have something of a portfolio, let’s say, that needs managing. So, that’s what I do. I manage property.”

She thinned her lips in a sympathetic smile and I mentally shook the vision away. There was no way anyone could feel pity for my professional situation – not when they’d probably used up all their pity credit on the right side of my face.

“So, architecture. Where do you hope to study?”

She picked up a napkin and wrung it in her hands while looking off to the side. I studied her profile. She had wide-set eyes and a small nose that curved up slightly at the tip. Her lips were full but petite, leading down to a dainty chin and long, swan-like neck. I had to focus on hearing the words that came out of her mouth.

“I’ve got a place in Edinburgh.”

“That’s a good college. Your mum must be proud.”

“She might be, if she knew. But I’m not so sure anymore.”

She hung her head and every part of me wanted to reach out to her. I only permitted my hand. I let it slide along the table, slow and trepid, until the tips of my fingers touched hers. They instantly warmed. Not just a hint of warmth, or a slight glow. It was a heat that took me by surprise. It made me want to both snatch my hand back and eclipse it beneath hers. She slowly raised her head and shone wide eyes at me, her lips parted.

Thankfully, I remembered what I was planning to say. “Then you should be proud of yourself. I’ve seen your CV, Rose. It’s beyond impeccable. You deserve a place at Edinburgh.”

“You really think so?”

Her question threw me. She didn’t truly care what I thought. Usually, I would have waved off a comment like that – yeah, sure, whatever. But this time, I cared less that she couldn’t possibly be genuine; I just wanted her to believe in herself.

“Yes, Rose. And I’ve been in this business long enough to know talent when I see it.”

A dusky blush crept along her skin. “Thank you. That really means a lot, Dalziel.”

Her fingers crept along mine and dipped beneath the knuckles, seeking cover. The warmth spread up my arm, across my shoulders and down my back.

“You can call me Dax,” I said, breaking another of my rules.

She blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“Dax,” I repeated. “It’s short for Dalziel. Most people call me Dax.”

“Oh, right. Dax.”

My name settled in her mouth like it was meant to stay there, and my heart ached. I wanted nothing more than for her to whisper that name in the throes of a climax, but I wasn’t sure I could give that to her. First of all, it wasn’t likely she’d ever truly want me, so an orgasm was unlikely. Further, according to my research, it was practically unheard of for a virgin to have an orgasm the first time. Chances were high that I would never hear my name fall from this woman’s lips in the way I wanted.

That thought ripped my hand from hers and I tensed instantly. I remembered Uncle Sinclair’s famous words: if you’re always on the attack, you need never play defence. This was my attack: to be impenetrable, to not show emotion, to not open myself up to ruin. I took from his catchphrase whenever I needed to feel strength or to justify when I’d been particularly hard on a tenant, and rarely more than that. Rupert and his younger brother Hector pretty much turned a deaf ear to it. But Ossian… Ossian Thorn, primary heir to his father’s fortune, and without doubt the most avidly avoided human on the island… he lived and died by that theory.

“Will you ever allow me to leave these rooms?” Rose’s face had hardened.

I frowned and looked around. “Why would you want to leave these rooms?”

Her eyes bugged. “To get some exercise? To breathe some fresh air? To feel for a few seconds like I might not be a total prisoner?”

I stared at her. The furnishings in this place cost the equivalent of a twin-engine aircraft. I’d made sure of it. The second I won Rose at auction, I had the entire suite ripped out and redecorated in the finest paints and furnishings.

“Where do you want to go?”

She sat back sharply. “Well… um… I’d like to see other parts of the house. Maybe if you have a library…”

“A library?”

I must have looked quite confused because her lips quirked at the corners. “Yes. You know, a place that houses books?”

I huffed. “I know what a library is. I’m just trying to understand why, when you’ve travelled all the way here, you want to visit a place you likely have access to at home.”

Her shoulders dropped. “No two libraries are ever the same. The editions, the variety, the smells… And think of all those stories hidden behind the spines.”

She shivered.

“Are you cold?”

“No. I’m just imagining what it feels like to stand in a library I’ve never visited before. It’s like making a new friend.”

Her tone was wistful and her eyes soft. In that moment I wanted to give her all the libraries in the world.

“We have one or two,” I said. “Or… five.”

She breathed in sharply. “You have *five* libraries?”

“For different purposes.” I waved a hand. “We have specialist libraries for things like business and professional interests. Mother has one of her own filled with what I can only imagine are romance novels, though I’ve seen a few dragons on the spines.” I mused with a shrug. “Father and Uncle have collections in their offices. And of course, there’s the master library.”

Rose licked her lips. “A master library?” she whispered, almost drooling like some drug addict.

“Yes. It’s where we house most of the first editions and collector’s items. We have all the classics, all the Booker prize winners, many contemporary works. I can show you if you like?”

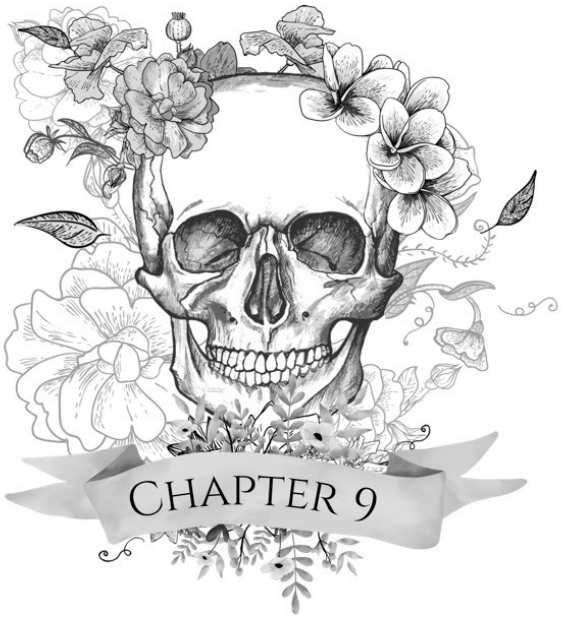
“Sh-show me?” Her hands were braced on the edge of the table as she leaned towards me, sharpening my senses.

“Yes. That’s what you said you wanted, isn’t it?”

“Well, um, yes! I just… I just didn’t expect you would let me.”

Something dark and thorny squeezed my heart. I stood and metaphorically straightened my spine.

“I’ll come back this afternoon. Be ready.”



Rose

I WATCHED HIS RETREATING BACK, feeling a mixture of fondness, awe and downright pissed-off-ness. Why was this man incapable of sticking around to finish a conversation? Oh, wait. He didn't do conversation, did he? He had people to do that for him. I rolled my eyes and popped the last small crumb into my mouth. I hadn't wanted to enjoy the croissant he prepared for me as much as I had. I picked up the small jar and dipped my little finger into it. Five minutes later, I'd shamelessly devoured it all.

I ran a hot bath and leisurely readied myself for what felt like noon. I still had no way of telling but I'd learned where the sun cast the shadows of the trees around the time my lunch was usually served. Sure enough, the second I rested my freshly manicured hands on the windowsill and pressed my lightly made-up face to the glass, a knock sounded at the door. I resisted an eye roll at the fact there was really no point in knocking since I couldn't open the damn thing anyway. Then a key turned in the lock and the door opened.

Dax stood at the other side. His form and face looked darker somehow than that morning, even though he hadn't changed. I walked languidly towards him, feeling his gaze travel over the new dress I'd picked out. It was another day dress – a pale silk, knee-length slip that swished around

my hips and thighs, reflecting the light from the windows. It was far more glamorous than anything I'd normally wear to a library, but hell, it was the only place I had to go, so why not dress up?

I walked half a pace ahead of him, down the stairs. At the bottom, he brushed his fingers against my back, directing me through the main hall towards yet another enormous wooden door. He pushed it open and drew a tormented gasp from my throat.

Fairy tales. Those were the only places that featured libraries like this one. Rows upon rows of shelves lined each wall, stretching from the floor to the double height ceiling. The room felt like warm spice and decadent musk thanks to the array of rich, burgundy spines and smell of aged paper and leather. I stepped inside, lifting my nose to breathe in every page.

I counted no fewer than three long ladders stretching up to the highest shelves and saw a cluster of leather club chairs that provided a calm reading spot by a cathedral-style window. It took me right back to the bookshop I used to sit in while I waited for my mum to finish shopping. The memory made my chest warm.

"Do you, um… have the book, *In Praise of Shadows*, by Junichiro Tanizaki?" My words sounded timid and slight and as I flicked my gaze back to him, I noticed his good eye had widened a fraction.

"It's about architecture," I explained. "It's pretty niche but you may have heard—"

"Yes," he rushed out, walking briskly past me to a shelf on the east side of the room. "It's right here."

He slipped a book from the shelf and handed it to me. His gaze made my skin sizzle as I stroked a hand over the well-worn cover.

"It's a beautiful book." I glanced up at him. "Have you read it?"

His throat constricted. "It's my favourite."

I blinked and felt time slow. "Mine too."

His stare was intense until he broke it and walked to the window. "I haven't read it since… well… my sight isn't so good now."

My body was drawn to him in slow motion and I settled into one of the chairs.

"Would you like me to read it to you?"

His silhouette seemed to expand in the glow of the afternoon light. "You'd do that for me?"

"Of course. Sit."

He turned and his mouth curled into a mischievous grin. It was the most I'd seen him smile. He rested his back against the curved window and slid to the floor at its foot.

I arched a brow. "You're sitting over there?"

He patted the floor beside him. "No, *we're* sitting over here."

"But these chairs…" I gestured at the unfeasibly soft club chair I was sitting comfortably in.

"But this view," he fired back.

He was referring to the one outside the window but his gaze was glued to me.

I stood and walked to the window, then held my dress as I sat, making sure my knees were covered. I'd never liked my knees. I glanced nervously sideways at him. He'd tipped his head back and closed his eyes.

Stifling a small smile, I opened the book at page thirty-two and began to read.

By the time I'd turned the page to chapter four, my side had become pressed into his and his arm had somehow snuck around my back to rest against my right hip. His chin rested on my left shoulder, his breath warming my collar bone. My own breath became tight as I tried not to move.

As my pause lengthened his eyes opened slowly.

I lifted my hand and rested the tips of my fingers against the dips and swells of his scars. He flinched slightly, then gently held my wrist as if to say it was okay that I touch him.

"Who did this to you?" I whispered.

His breathing became heavier, deeper, and a full minute passed before he answered.

"Only the person who joins herself to me forever will know. She is the only one I will trust."

His gaze flicked to me as I tried to cover the disappointment in my features. I knew what he meant by those words. I wasn't that person. I wasn't her. So I would never have the privilege of knowing his most haunting secret. I felt the sharpness of a blade against my chest and mentally shook it away.

The next words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. "Who is she?"

His gaze panned back to me and his head tilted backwards as if the proximity to me made him uncomfortable. “I don’t know. I’m not sure I’ve met her yet.”

My heart sank even further. He didn’t even know who he was looking for. But he was so strong-willed, so clear of thought, and so determined, he would know her the second he saw her.

For some reason, that thought loosened my inhibitions. I wasn’t the one for him. The pressure to have him like me, weirdly, was relieved. My lips fell as loose as my tension.

“I think your scars are beautiful.”

I ran my fingers over them, awestruck at the intricacy of the patterns and the crevices.

“What?” His tone was harsh and I felt his torso stiffen, but it didn’t affect me now I knew I wasn’t even in the running. I continued to trace the lines of the skin grafts and where his skin had tried to heal itself.

“Doesn’t it *amaze* you what our bodies can do?” I whispered. “Your skin doesn’t care what it looks like. It only cares that it can protect you. That’s why it’s healed in this ridge-like formation. It’s learned that there is evil out there and it’s given you tougher armour. Do you know how loving that is?”

He turned away from my hand and I let it drop to the book in my lap, but I wasn’t finished.

“Something inside of you is so strong it wants to you to carry on. It wants to keep you protected so you can do whatever it was you were put on this earth to do.”

I gently turned his face towards me, ignoring the redness in his eyes. It was either sadness or fury, and I didn’t mind which. Dalziel Thorn was a furnace of emotion. If he held it all in for much longer, he would spontaneously combust.

“You shouldn’t hide away from it, Dax. These marks are proof that you can conquer anything. We’ve been conditioned to think only a certain look can be labelled ‘beautiful’ but if you look back over centuries of art, many different forms have been given that moniker. Really, the only person who needs to think you’re beautiful is… you.”

He stared at me for a long, heart-wrenching moment, then lifted himself up to his knees to face me.

“What about you, Rose?” His voice was gravelly. “What about your scars?”

I was backed up against the window but I felt bold. “I know my scars are why you chose me. You thought that if I felt flawed too, I wouldn’t be as choosy as another woman. I’d feel grateful, even, to have been selected when I have such hideous scars across my back.”

He paled and sat back on his heels. “That’s not true.”

I let the book fall to the floor and reached for his hands. “Don’t feel bad about that. It’s human nature to try to appeal to someone you feel is in your league. Nobody wants to be rejected.”

A dark shadow crossed his face. “You… you think you’re in my *league*?”

Embarrassment engulfed me. Had I just declared I might be in the same league as formidable, striking, multi-billionaire architect Dalziel Thorn? *What the fuckety fuck, Rose? Shut the hell up!*

“No, no, that’s not what I mean. Please don’t misunderstand me. I have a lot of respect for you, as an architect and as a burn survivor. Believe me, I do. But as far as leagues go, we are miles apart.” I ventured a weak smile and looked away.

For almost five minutes we sat, our bodies mirroring each other like magnets, but our faces turned in opposite directions. I knew I should probably ask to return to my room, the awkwardness justified it. But I didn’t want to leave his company.

I became aware of his chest rising and falling, faster and deeper. It warmed something feral inside me and I didn’t dare move.

“Can I see your scars, Rose?”

I almost jumped out of my skin at the suddenness of his question.

“You… you want to see my back?”

As our eyes connected, I noticed veins at the sides of his head swollen and throbbing.

I nodded wordlessly and his eyes followed me as I stood, my back turned to the window. For a second, I worried someone might see but not one soul had passed by in the hours we’d been sitting there. Any fear I had was quickly overridden. I felt warm all over like this was going to be the most loving, giving thing I would ever do.

Slowly, I reached around the back of my neck, found the zip and tugged it downwards. My blushes intensified with every inch. When the

zip reached all the way down, resting at the crest of my bottom, I turned tentatively.

The only sound I could hear was Dax's breathing getting shallower and almost furious. Maybe burn survivors' reactions to other peoples' injuries differed. While I saw nothing but beauty in Dax's scars, maybe he saw a reminder of the fear he felt when whatever happened to him happened.

"Turn your back to me," he said, his tone soft but his voice rough.

I did and braced myself for the sharp intake of breath and sudden zip closing up my dress. I squeezed my eyes closed in anticipation.

Nothing happened.

I slowly opened my eyes and ears.

His breathing slowed like silk, and his fingers touched the top of my spine where there was a patch of undamaged, virgin skin. He gently stroked downwards, feeling every lump and bump that I'd tried to hide over the years. It was one thing to tell another person their scars were beautiful. It was a whole other thing to believe the same of your own. I pressed my fingertips to the glass and held my breath as his fingers drew pictures down the length of my spine. It felt as though he was writing something, but ever since my skin had taken on different crevices and terrains, I wasn't sure of what I felt anymore.

I heard a low rumble from his lips. "So pretty," he said, in a soft murmur.

Something hardened in me. He was crazy. A mad man. He'd locked me in a damn tower. I shouldn't be letting anything he said go to my head. But there was no denying that the touch of his fingers set my skin ablaze. I felt whole again. No, not just whole. Renewed. My scars were a part of me, and they made me stronger, just like I said Dax's scars made him.

My head spun with the realisation and at the same time, Dax reached up and gently pushed the dress over my shoulders. With nothing to anchor it at the waist, it fell to the floor, exposing all of me. With my back still turned, all I could do was listen. Dax was borderline hyperventilating, and if I stopped to self-analyse, I was too.

"Rose…"

That one whispered word called to the centre of my soul like a prayer and I suddenly yearned for him to see all of me. Every inch.

I turned fully to face him just as he swallowed loudly and dropped his jaw. His good eye was wide and glistening; his damaged one dimmer but

still alive with curiosity. They both raked over me, slowly, starting at the the dip of my collarbone, warming it under his gaze. He then moved down over the rounds of my rose-pink lace-covered breasts, widening at the hardened nipples beneath. Greedily, they lowered, caressing the skin across my stomach, to the apex of my thighs. My whole being heated up from the zenith of my core, radiating through my flesh and bones to the surface, making my skin prickle. He didn't let up, gliding his gaze down over my hips and thighs, cresting my knees and calves, until it landed on the slender curve of my ankles.

By the time Dax's eyes had roamed my entire body, I was a pulsating mess, hoping to God my pants were at least a little absorbent. No one had ever worshipped me with their eyes before, and that's exactly what it felt like.

My head spun with the absence of any knowledge of what was going on, what he was about to do. The confusion only deepening when he leaned down and wrapped a hand around my right ankle. I jumped a little, even though his touch was soft. The contact was unexpected, but no less needed. He bent his whole body forward, as though he was going to bite into my skin, but he stopped, his nose a millimetre from the hairs of my shin. What happened next challenged every idea I'd ever formed about intimacy.

Even more slowly than he'd guided his gaze, Dax lifted his head up to my knee. The only contact was between the hairs standing on end everywhere on my leg and those lining his top lip. But the impact was powerful. Even the smallest sensation set a part of my body on fire. Then I realised that, as he moved, he inhaled deeply.

My eyes almost popped out of my head. Was he… *smelling* me?

A satisfied moan meandered from his lips and my heart thumped. His hand stroked upwards and he continued his exploration of my scent along the base of the thigh. My whole body tensed the closer he got to the top of my legs, then he stopped.

My head almost exploded with questions. *What do I smell like? Do I smell bad? Why has he stopped? What have I done wrong?*

He opened his mouth and hot breath fanned across my sex.

"Breathe, Rose."

I released a complete lungful of oxygen from my chest, then panted at the realisation I'd been holding it in for what felt like a year.

I forced my breathing to slow, trying to acclimatise to the fact Dax Thorn was kneeling before me with his mouth less than an inch from my vagina. While he stared at my privates, I glanced down at his head. Despite the obvious scarring across his crown, his hair was full, jet black and obviously tamed by some probably extortionately expensive barber. I had a sudden urge to run my fingers through it, but through the insane lust and wanting came a small dart of fear. All I really knew about this man was that he was capable of locking me up. He jolted when I touched his scar with permission – what would he do if I touched the top of his head without it? I didn't want to find out.

He remained at my core, taking deep meditative breaths. With each one, I softened, to the point I thought I was going to melt into a puddle at his knees. Thankfully, he continued his perusal of my sweat-coated skin, rising to his feet as he reached my breasts. He bent his head to inhale the tops of my shoulders, my neck, my jaw and finally the soft skin covering my temple. I throbbed painfully beneath his presence.

Then he moved his mouth an inch to the shell of my ear, the heat from his lips almost blistering the skin.

My heart stopped when he opened his mouth.

"You smell just like my dreams."

He lingered for several seconds and could probably hear my rabid heart clattering around, out of rhythm.

My chest rose and fell with laboured breaths and I continued to stare dead ahead. I wasn't cut out for this. I was a virgin. I had no idea what I was doing. Or, more to the point, what *he* was doing. It was clear Dax Thorn was experienced, because who else could turn a woman on to the point of pain simply by smelling her? I was simply no match for him. I was wet between my thighs. Completely wet. And he was so utterly in control of himself. Shame and humiliation washed over me slowly, relishing in my discomfort.

My rambling inner dialogue was instantly halted when two large, warm hands clasped each side of my face and his body pressed against mine. His lips were still hovering at the side of my face, but when they pressed hot against my skin, I gasped, goosebumps erupting all over my skin. With each inhale, my breasts pressed into his chest, but his lips didn't move. As awareness of my body returned in pieces, I also became aware of a pressure against my pelvic bone.

Was that…? Fuck.

Like a wanton hussy I pressed my hips forward a fraction. His lips left my skin and I heard a sharp intake of breath. Then he stepped backwards, allowing a chasm to open up between us. Cool air licked at my grateful skin and I immediately looked at his face. I thought I'd seen pain before, but never before a whole world of it ingrained into the colour of his cheeks and the crease of his forehead.

He looked away quickly as if the image of me had stung him. Then he bent down, lifted my dress up and covered my shoulders. Avoiding my gaze, he gently turned me around and drew the zip closed. I was glued to the floor in shock so felt almost thankful when he slipped my hand into his and walked me to the door.

I felt strange, as though my body was behaving brazenly of its own accord. This must have been what lust felt like. My legs shook as we walked back towards the tower. Back towards my luxurious and decadent prison cell. I had just bared myself to him, let him trace every part of me and let him work me up into a literal frenzy, and he still hadn't taken me. Did he have any intention of taking me? Was it all a ruse just to get a prisoner he could toy with? Because that's exactly what he was doing.

I suddenly felt homesick. Not for my house, but for Mum and Remi, for my room, the road I lived on, things I could trust. As we neared the tower and its steep circular stairs, my heart did somersaults in my chest. I'd just been crazily turned on by someone who'd basically kidnapped me. I knew what this was – there was a well-known reason for behaviour like this. I was suffering from Stockholm Syndrome. It was textbook. God, I was so unoriginal.

I didn't feel anything for Dax; it wasn't possible. I was protecting myself. My mind was playing a trick to help me process the trauma of being locked in a tower. A *fucking tower*.

I glanced around. One of the security guys was up ahead on the first floor. The other was right behind Dax, and Dax was right behind me. I looked down as we climbed, seeing the floor below inch further and further away. I felt along the wooden banister, then before I could second guess myself, I reached for the other side of the handrail, flipped my legs over and dropped fifteen feet to the ground. I crumbled in a heap, the pain only muffled by the sound of shouting. Dax was ballistic, yelling at the two men while scrambling down the stairs. I tried to get to my feet but my

left leg wouldn't work. I looked over my shoulder just in time to see Dax shove his security guard into the wall before throwing himself down the stairs. Fear punctured my lungs making it hard to breathe.

Why won't my leg work?

I flipped onto my hands and knees, half-crawling, half-running back in the direction we'd come from. I'd seen the door I'd arrived through. That was my exit. I bit back a scream as what felt like daggers sliced my leg from hip to ankle. It was worse than excruciating. Thundering footsteps closed in on me and my heart banged at the base of my throat. I stumbled again, landing back on my left leg, the pain leaving me blind.

WARMTH COURSED through layers of skin into my tissues and bones. There was still pain but it was distant, as though it was outside of my body, not right in its core. I was floating, weightless, curled into a cocoon, feeling safer than I remembered ever feeling. A wave-like motion lulled me into a delirious bliss and I allowed myself to sink into this momentary departure into insanity. That had to be what this was, because there was no other explanation.

My lids fluttered as if in a dream and I saw movement beyond them. There was darkness directly before me and flashing colours in the periphery. Just beautiful.

"Breathe for me Rose."

The deep voice jolted my lids open and with the realisation I was still very much in the middle of a nightmare came the pain. My leg burned with agony, and not the good kind of burn, the burn I felt everywhere else on my body. It was a bad burn. I'd broken my leg. Possibly in several places.

Now I really wasn't going anywhere.

A spasm pierced through my knee and I willingly blacked out.

Rose

WHEN I AWOKE AGAIN, I didn't bother opening my eyes. Instead, I allowed whoever was in the room to believe I was still sleeping while I got a grip on my surroundings.

I heard breathing. Deep, steady breathing. It was coming from someone less than five feet away. I tuned out the sound to focus on others but after a minute or two I had to surmise there were none.

"I know you're awake, Rose."

The voice made me jump and with a fair amount of disgruntlement, I opened my eyes. Dax was sitting in an armchair, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees.

"Your eyes move differently when you're sleeping."

I turned my face away, confused by the feelings raging around my chest. I wished I could blame the instant dryness of my mouth on the fact I hadn't drunk any water for hours, but that wasn't the reason. *He* was the reason. Seeing him fill out a chair that *was* made for him, seeing the concern tattooed across his brow and seeing his shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows, scars decorating his right forearm, made me light-headed. At the same time, I felt the weight of dread in my stomach, anchoring me to the

bed. I'd tried to escape and it hadn't worked. It would be the last time I'd ever leave this room.

"You suffered a bad sprain," he said, with a softness that surprised me. I'd just tried to run away from him. Even after we'd shared… I didn't know what to call it… a moment? I still struggled with what that was. He was my captor. It wasn't right that I near as melted into a puddle under the swell of his gaze.

"I'm surprised you didn't break any bones. You fell fifteen feet onto an ancient stone floor."

I kept my face turned away, mortified that my attempt to escape failed before it had even begun.

"I'm not going to ask why you did it, Rose. But I am going to ask you not to do it again."

"Why?" My voice cracked.

There was a long pause before he took a slow, deep breath.

"Because I'm so close to being broken myself, if anything happened to you while you were in my care, I would… die."

"Then let me go." The second the words were out, I felt empty, as though I'd stored them for so long, they'd puffed out like rice.

He breathed out slowly and I thought I heard a stutter in the back of his throat. "I have."

In disbelief, I turned to face him. "What?"

A muscle in his left eye flickered as it narrowed. "You're free to go."

My eyes were drawn to an object turning in his hands, propelling me back to the day I found him sitting on the bed delivering his ultimate condition. He followed my gaze and stopped turning. When he held it up in the space between us, I noticed it was a key. The key to my room.

"This is yours." He leaned towards me and took my hand. A current spread through it and I lost all human feeling. He placed the key in my palm then folded my fingers around it, before pulling away. I yearned for him to take it back, just so I could feel his skin on mine again.

"What drugs did you give me?"

He blinked. "Just… painkillers. Why?"

"The pain has disappeared completely, and my skin feels strange."

"The pain has gone because I gave you Basidiomine – a pain reliever we develop here on the island. It's only just gone out to market but it's the

most potent pain relief pharmaceutical in the western world. As for your skin feeling strange… I can't answer that."

I kept my voice level. "Will I be able to walk?"

"Yes, but we'll give you crutches and any help you need."

I watched his eyes for some suggestion he was bluffing but saw nothing but sadness. I pulled my arms back to push myself up but his hand pressed down on my shoulder.

"You need more rest, Rose."

I stared at him. "You said I was free to go."

"You are. But I think you should stay one more night. Just to get some rest. Please?"

A beat passed between us. "Are you going to take my virginity?"

He hung his head and shook it slowly.

"No. I've put you through enough. You should save it for someone who deserves it. Someone who deserves you."

Even in my drugged and weakened state I managed a small frown.

"You didn't care about being deserving before."

He lifted his head and gaze to the ceiling. "I didn't know anything before. *Anything*." He huffed a laugh to himself. "Now I know too damn much."

My head spun with everything he was and wasn't saying and I didn't have the mental capacity to make sense of it.

I turned my face back towards the ceiling. I was going to be out of this place in the morning, but nothing about that thought lightened me. I was tired. My body had been through more in the last twenty-four hours than possibly my entire life. It had gone from being alive with lust to broken.

I sensed him rise to his feet and felt the shift in the air as he did. It whipped a little bit of oxygen from my lungs.

"Harrod will check on you first thing and help you to the car. You can be home by lunchtime."

I didn't reply. I couldn't find any words to explain my cacophony of disturbed feelings. He left without another word and I let my eyelids fall shut.

It would all make sense in the morning.

I MANAGED an hour of broken sleep then twisted restlessly in the baking hot sheets. I couldn't shake the sensation of Dax's skin brushing against mine, or the feeling of being worshipped as he inhaled me from head to toe. I shivered even though my skin was burning, and a relentless throbbing returned to my core.

I moaned and flipped my head from side to side. It was useless, the vision of him wouldn't leave. I tried to think of anything that wasn't Dax Thorn – the journey home, how on earth I was going to make it to university now, what Remi would say when I announced I still had my V card… but it was no use. Nothing worked. Dax Thorn seemed to be inked on the underside of my eyelids. When I gave in to the image of his towering height and thundering depth, the throbbing between my legs intensified. It only stopped when I rushed my hand towards it and cupped my sex.

Oh.

I pressed down hard, as if that would contain my desire for a man who'd captured me for a pet. All it did was fuel my need. My eyelids drifted closed and I circled a finger around my stiffened clitoris. I might have been a virgin but I knew how to make myself come. I just hadn't done it in a while. I gasped as lubrication coated my fingers. I knew I was turned on but it usually took way longer than this to ease the way for my fingers. I bucked against my hand, suddenly needing something more. I didn't dare push a finger inside myself, so I stroked around my entrance, my thighs parting involuntarily.

I felt Dax's lips at my ear and a wild moan escaped my mouth.

I returned my fingers to my swollen nub and circled it again, massaging it with firm sweeps. I didn't know what I was doing but it felt nice. Actually, nice had nothing on what I was feeling. It was amazing. Starlit. Combustive. My fingers moved of their own accord as my hips swirled desperately.

Oh God.

I pictured the same lips that had kissed my temple move to my mouth, just as the nerve endings in my pelvic bone united with fiery tension. My jaw fell open and I cried out his name, safe in the knowledge the walls were so thick there wasn't a chance in hell anyone would have heard. My hips bucked with violently blissful spasms and I surrendered to the rush of heat as it washed over me, dragging me under.

I continued to shudder long after the orgasm had subsided. Something I had never done before. When Dax entered my vision again, I wasn't so annoyed about it. I was too loose and too soft to be annoyed about anything. Promising myself I would only do this once, I let his name fall from my lips in a grateful whisper, then I closed my eyes, and slept.

SOMETHING WOKE me up with a shock. As I looked around, trying to make sense of my surroundings in the darkness, I heard it again. A muted, muffled crash which drew my eyes to the ceiling. It sounded like the roof of the tower had fallen in.

In my half-asleep, delirious state I thought I heard footsteps outside my room and doors banging elsewhere in the tower. I listened, holding my breath for a few minutes. There were no more loud crashes and no more footsteps. I peeled back the bedcovers and lowered my feet to the floor. I had to know exactly how much damage I'd done to myself and how hard it was going to be to get out of this place. I also had to know if Dax had told me the truth: that I could indeed leave if I wanted.

A shard of pain shot up my left leg as I put weight on it, so I hopped, wincing, out of the bedroom, through the main suite to the door. I took a sobering breath as my hand rested on the handle, then turned it slowly. I fully expected resistance when I pulled it towards me, but it opened, as light as a feather.

With my breath caught in my throat, I looked around the door onto an empty landing. No security guards. I hopped to the threshold and bent my head around the frame. If there had been people running up and down the stairs, they were long gone now. I toyed with the idea of leaving there and then but it would have been pointless. There was no one around and there was no way I'd get to a port or helipad on foot. Literally, on *one* foot.

Softly, I closed the door and hobbled back to the bedroom. The second my head hit the luscious pillows, I was out like a light.

The next time I awoke, it was morning. The sound of a silver tray and clinking of breakfastware alerted me to the fact someone was in the suite. I slid out of bed and wrapped the bathrobe around myself before hobbling out of the bedroom.

“Oh, miss, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb you.” The maid was looking at me, sheepishly.

“Don’t worry. I think I’ve slept in a little. What time is it?”

She smiled. “Almost eleven-thirty, miss.”

“Okay.” I shrugged. “I slept in *a lot*.”

“I hope you’re hungry.” She lifted the cloche from a serving platter, revealing cooked bacon, sausages, baked tomatoes and mushrooms, as well as cold meats, cereals, pastries and fruits. “Master Thorn said you might have an appetite today.”

I sighed. “Right, yes. Because of the accident.”

She frowned. “He said it was because you’d had a restless night. What accident?”

“My ankle,” I said. “I fell and sprained it.” The words sounded impressively clear give my inner dialogue was stuttering around, confused and alarmed. Why did Dax think I’d had a restless night? As far as he knew, I’d been dosed up on Bas-whatever-it-was-called. If he’d had any inkling I hadn’t slept soundly, he…

My eyes darted around the room looking for anything that might resemble a camera but landed on nothing obvious.

“Is everything okay, miss?”

“Yeah, um, fine,” I replied, my gaze scouring the corners and crevices.

“Master Thorn also asked me to give you this.” She handed me an envelope with just my name scrawled in a spidery hand across the front.

“What is it?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, miss. All he said was it’s the least you deserve.” Her cheeks flushed as though that one sentence had made her privy to not only her boss’s private business, but his private emotions too. “Tell me when you would like to leave and I’ll arrange for a car to collect you right away.”

I took a deep breath and forced it back out along with any morsel of misplaced longing I’d felt for Dax Thorn. “I’d like to leave in one hour.”

She bowed her head and began to back away towards the door. “As you wish, miss.”

“Wait…”

She stopped and jerked her face upwards.

“Thank you,” I said, softly. “You were kind to me and I really appreciate that.”

Her eyes darted nervously to a spot above my head. “You’re welcome,” she said with a timid smile, then left me holding an envelope that seemed to become heavier with every passing second.

Dax

MY HEAD HURT.

Not from the bottle of whiskey I knew I'd downed without even opening my eyes, but from knowing everything about my life from now on was going to feel empty. I was never going to be complete. I'd found my other half, yet I'd done everything in my power, willingly or not, to repel her. And rightly so.

I was ugly, ruthless, damaged goods.

A barbarian.

A beast.

My neck groaned as I lifted my head off the carpet and gazed around at the room. It was blurred mostly, for which I was thankful. I knew a mass of blur would be preferable to the total destruction it masked. Memories of the previous night came back to me like falling shards of glass. I'd witnessed the most beautiful thing anyone had done for me, believing for a split second I was worthy of it, and I hadn't even been looking at the camera.

The live feed from Rose's room had run continually ever since I installed her inside. It gave me ample opportunity to study her like a rare specimen no man had ever caught. I'd spent night after night watching,

listening, marvelling at the rise and fall of her bedsheets as she slept, smiling in one corner of my mouth as she pattered barefoot from one room to the next, sometimes naked, sometimes not. I thought I knew every inch of her body, just from having watched it move around from every angle. But I knew nothing. Holding her flesh in my hands, so close to my lips, driving me despairingly mad, showed me how little I really knew. Seeing a woman's naked flesh from a distance was a shallow turn-on. Having it displayed so warmly, openly and closely stoked a desire so deep it could wound the most cavernous man.

And I was wounded.

I thought my heart had already broken as we walked back up the towers stairs, until I heard her cry out when her leg took the brunt of her fall. I acted on pure instinct, shoving anyone and anything out of my way to reach her. My gut twisted at the agony on her face. Her pain was my pain, and it was excruciating.

Letting her go wasn't just the right thing to do, it was the only thing. I'd been fooling myself – she was never going to want me. It felt wrong to say she just wanted the money because there was so much more to Rose than that. But it would have been a stretch too far to imagine she wanted me *and* the money.

It took an otherworldly amount of strength to walk away from her bedside, knowing I would never see her in the flesh again. I should have switched off the feed; it would have only served to torture me further. I was sitting at my desk with only the dim orange glow of an antique lamp illuminating the drawings I'd laid out. Drafting concepts for buildings that would never see the light of day was the only pastime guaranteed to distract me from anything else. But then I heard her.

At first, I thought she was having a bad dream. My instinct was to rush to her room and soothe her, but her moans turned to soft little gasps and luscious breaths. My body rose from the chair without command and moved across the room to the screen. I pressed the volume button and watched the bedclothes moving gently. Her eyes were closed and her lips were moist and parted. My stomach clenched possessively and I fought the urge to beat off – I needed to apply my whole focus and commit it to memory for the rest of my life.

Then she said the one word I never thought I'd hear fall from the mouth of any woman, let alone the woman of my darkest, most delicious

dreams.

My name.

I cranked up the volume as loud as I could, keeping my eyes glued to the screen.

Oh God, Dax…

I then heard a heavy thud and realised it was the sound of my knees slamming onto the floor. Her head fell back as her spine arched, and a long, untethered cry filtered through the screen. I was still staring open-mouthed at the feed long after she'd rolled over and fallen into a deep sleep.

The first thing I did was pour a large whiskey. I needed a drink after that. Then I paced the room trying to come up with a reasonable explanation, because surely I'd got it wrong. I had to have got it so completely wrong.

I'd locked her up against her wishes. I'd forced her to have dinner with me, read stories to me, strip for me. And all of it she was forced to do in an attempt to save herself. It all became starkly, horrendously clear. If she had been turned on, it wasn't by me, it was by the situation. And I was damn fool to ever have believed otherwise.

The more I thought through the ridiculousness of my hopes and dreams and the fact a small part of me had faith in them, the angrier I became. Before I knew it, my rooms were unrecognisable. Chairs and tables were upturned, their legs beaten and broken; curtains were torn and ragged. The entire contents of my drinks cabinet, cut crystal glasses and vintage port worth hundreds of pounds had been smashed to pieces. And three thousand rock crystals from my seventh century chandelier had scattered in every direction. My writing desk with the architectural drawings was the only thing left unscathed.

I peeled myself up off the floor and walked to the window. The mid-morning sun illuminated the south-facing lawns; it made Blackcap Hall appear almost pleasant. Very soon, a black Mercedes would be cruising down the long drive carrying my heart. I pressed my fist and my forehead against the glass and let long seconds pass as my skin cooled.

Behind me, a door handle turned and almost instantly, another person was inside my rooms and running up behind me. I turned just in time to feel a red hot slap across my unscarred cheek. When I turned my head back to face her, she had never looked more beautiful.

“How DARE you!” she shouted.

She raised her hand again but I caught it in a thick, tight grip. My eyes narrowed while my body expunged the shock of her entrance.

“You brought me here, hid me away, made me discover myself, made me *want* you. And for what? So, you can hate yourself even more? So, you can force me out without getting what you paid for? Without giving me what I want?”

I shook my head. “You don’t know what you want.”

“STOP TELLING ME WHAT I WANT!” She tried to yank her hand back but I didn’t let it move an inch.

I didn’t know what hurt more, the lies coming out of her mouth, or the shock of seeing her again after I thought I’d drunk and smashed away the worst of my heartbreak.

“Just go home, Rose. Take the fucking money and go.”

She stilled and steadied her breath. “I don’t want the money.”

“What?”

My grip loosened and she pulled her hand away, wrapping her other hand around the wrist.

“I don’t want the money, Dax,” she said, her voice soft but deadly serious. “But I do still want you to take my virginity.”

I closed my eyes to keep from letting her words get inside. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

Opening my lids again, I watched her lips curl inwards.

“I know exactly what I’m saying. I want you. Why won’t you believe me?”

I dropped my gaze to the floor. “I kept you here too long…”

“Two weeks.”

“You’re vulnerable…”

“I know what I’m doing.”

I clamped my hands over the back of a chair and released a low, tight growl. “I will NOT take advantage of you.”

She stepped towards me and curled a fist into my shirt. Her proximity, the volunteered touch, sent a spasm of desire shooting down my spine. “You won’t, Dax,” she said. “I’m giving myself to you willingly.”

My eyes felt raw with the need to look at her but I forced them not to waver. When she leaned in, I could feel the perspiration rising off me in waves. If the sight of my suite in total ruin hadn’t already convinced her of

my madness, and my capacity to cause irreparable damage, surely my inability to make eye contact cleared up any doubt.

She dipped beneath my lashes, placing herself right in the centre of my eye line. Her cheeks were pink, her lips soft and parted.

“I want you, Dax.”

She wrapped a hand round the back of my neck and pulled her face up to mine until her lips brushed the scars across my cheekbones. My own lashes drifted shut and a loose moan issued from my lips.

“Please,” she whispered against the raised ridges of my skin. “Take my virginity. I want no one else to have it but you.”

I became aware of nothing but the heat of her breath and the tightness of my clothes. My shirt felt ready to burst and my boxers and trousers felt like a vice around my cock and thighs. I wanted to touch her. I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to fuck her gently through her very first time, then fuck her hard every day until the last. And knowing I couldn’t do any of that made me want to kill myself.

“Please Dax,” she said. Her voice was all choked up. My cock weighed heavy and throbbed. “I need this.”

I need this.

My knees sang as they thudded again to the floor and my mind emptied of every argument it had created to fight this feral, unbridled urge.

My hands found their way to the crest of her hips. As they rested there, her quiet sigh caressed the top of my head. I pressed my forehead softly into her stomach. She had to stop me. I was a bad, bad man who’d tricked her into wanting something that didn’t exist. Sure, I had money, sure I lived in a damn castle. It didn’t change the fact I was no knight in shining armour. I was a beast. A scarred and deformed beast.

Her fingertips drew sketches across my crown and teased through my hair. Her breathing had slowed and steadied. She was calm. I had to keep my heart as far from the thought I might have caused that as possible. I could give her what she thought she wanted, but I couldn’t let this madness become belief.

As I breathed her in, a sweet scent touched my nose, infusing my vision. Her need rose through the air making me dizzy.

I held my breath, then ran my hands down her hips and legs to her ankles. I wrapped my fingers around them and gently caressed the skin,

almost weeping at how right she felt. Even slower still, I stroked my way back up her calves, pausing briefly in the dips behind her knees. She rocked on her heels, stabilising herself.

My breath quickened and my pulse raced when my fingertips trailed up the backs of her thighs. I stroked along the crease of her bottom to the outer edge of her thighs and the lace of her pants. With a loud sigh, I pressed my face into the fabric of her dress. It was the only thing separating my lips from her pussy.

The silk dragged against my face and I leaned back to let it pass. As my gaze flicked upwards, I caught a glimpse of fire in her eyes. My breath caught as I broke contact to see a small triangle of beautiful rose pink lace presented to me. The skin beneath wasn't quite bare, which I liked. I wanted a virgin, not a child. In a beat I was overtaken. Her sweet scent, the shadow of her glance imprinted on my eyelids, and the heat of my need collided and I pressed my tongue to the lace. She gasped audibly and shuddered, which sent a ripple of shock down my neck and across my shoulders.

She couldn't have faked that.

I'd given her no warning.

Something ripped me from the inside out, like a uncaged demon burning hell to smithereens. I looked up at her again and assessed the darkness clouding her eyes. She couldn't actually want this, could she?

Her lips parted and mouthed a word. "More."

My heart stopped, my stomach clenched and my cock leapt.

And I let the madness take me.

Rose

HIS EYES BLAZED and he leaned back in towards me. A traitorous moan escaped my lips releasing the heaviness of my craving. His tongue flattened and made a wave motion against my lace underwear, dancing across my clit in delicious slow ripples. More soft gasps rolled off my lips as I savoured every sensation his tongue created. Just when I thought I couldn't take anymore, his thumb reached across and pulled the lace to one side. His hot, wet flesh against my clitoris made me shake. Suddenly, my pants disappeared, and as if I wasn't already in heaven, his kisses and licks made my head spin. They were slow and teasing, just keeping me on the edge of bliss.

"Oh wow," I gasped, resisting the urge to rotate my hips and chase his tongue. Each time I pressed forward slightly, he pulled back, enforcing full control. It became clear quickly, if he wanted me to feel the flat of his tongue, he'd give it to me when he chose to. If he wanted me to feel his lips sucking gently on my clit, he'd do it in his own time. The tension in my legs made me weak. I needed to come but I didn't want this to ever end. He hadn't given in yet, I could tell; he was simply giving me something he knew I desperately needed.

He paused briefly, his lips resting on my pussy. “Do you need to come, Rose?” His voice had deepened to unrecognisable depths.

“Yes,” I gasped. It took every ounce of effort to speak. “But I still want you inside me, Dax. I still want you to take my virginity.”

He stilled for several long seconds before flicking out his tongue again, making me jerk.

“Promise me. Please.”

He lifted his head and gazed up through thick black lashes. His lips were shiny with the evidence of my arousal. He grabbed handfuls of my bottom and fisted, the pain heightening my arousal even more. My skin bruised as he lifted me off the floor and sat me on the chair he’d leaned his weight on only minutes earlier.

“Relax,” he ordered, stroking the skin he’d just wrung out like a cloth. “I promise.”

He pushed my thighs apart and fed his tongue into my heat, planting a palm against my stomach when my body involuntarily bucked towards him. He alternated between burying his tongue inside me and sucking on my clit until the room turned white.

“Jesus, Rose, you’re so wet,” he murmured as a fresh wave of lust poured out of me.

“You made me this way,” I choked out as the crest of the wave approached. I reached one hand behind me and grabbed the back of the chair while the other gripped his hair pulling him even deeper onto my clit.

God.

He clamped his mouth over me and sucked hard, swirling his tongue round and round until every single muscle in my stomach clenched hard. My jaw unhinged and a feral noise ricocheted off the walls as I shuddered through an intense orgasm.

I held him tightly as I rode it out, violent spasms almost folding my body in two. My heartrate barely had time to settle before I was lifted again and carried into his bedroom. Our eyes connected and held onto each other fiercely, not breaking as he laid me on the bed. My gaze flitted between his good eye and his white one, both appearing otherworldly and utterly perfect. He pressed one arm into the bed while he unzipped his trousers and pushed them down his legs. Without tearing my gaze from

his, I unbuttoned his shirt until it hung open revealing a flash of scar tissue from his right shoulder to his belly button.

He settled between my legs, his cock hard and angled towards me, then he lowered his lips. He reached a hand into my hair and fisted it hard before kissing me softly. Everything about him screamed contradiction. One side hard, one side soft. One side blessed; one side damaged. He was yin and yang personified. Without scars there can be no perfection.

Without shadows there can be no beauty.

He licked my lips and tongue with gentle urgency, biting, nibbling and sucking while the head of his cock pressed against me. Instinctively, I lifted my knees, opening myself up. His cock slid into my entrance and Dax stilled. Even his lips stopped moving as though he'd been turned to stone.

"Yes, I'm sure," I whispered against his warm skin.

He released a pent-up sigh and kissed me deeply, his cock burrowing another inch. I held my breath anticipating pain, but so far I had only felt slight discomfort and unfamiliarity. He was stretching me from the inside out but nothing about it felt wrong.

Dax pushed himself in a little then kissed and caressed my lips while I acclimatised. "Are you okay?" he asked between short breaths.

I nodded, not trusting the words that might come out of my mouth. I was more than okay. I felt amazing. Womanly and strong.

"This won't make you come," he said, in a voice so quiet I had to concentrate to hear. "Not the first time."

"I know that." My throat was dry with nerves.

He paused and stroked the back of his hand down the side of my face. He was only halfway inside but it felt as though I couldn't take any more of him.

"But I'll do whatever I can to make this good for you, okay?"

His eyes were almost black and his brow lightly furrowed. He seemed to be holding something back, but I nodded.

"Have you done this a lot?" I said, then baulked at the question – both the subject matter and the ridiculous timing of it. A small dimple appeared on his left cheek and his eyes danced, though he didn't smile. He didn't mock my naivety.

"Not lately."

I pouted. "Well, that's a little non-committal."

His eyebrows rose. “You want to talk about this *now*?”

I closed my eyes feeling the blood rush to my cheeks. “No. I’m sorry.”

His fingertips against my forehead made my eyelids ping and this time he was smiling.

“I’ve had a few relationships – not serious. But…”

His eyelashes cast downwards and I ducked to peek under them.

“…not since the incident.”

His choice of word made me still. He’d said *incident*, not *accident*. Someone had done this to him on purpose. My chest tightened and my pelvic area stretched, just as Dax’s eyes widened.

“Fuck,” he breathed out.

“What?” I panted slightly at the increasing pressure between my legs.

“You just pulled me in, Rose. I’m almost fully inside you. Are you okay?”

I reached up and grabbed the collar of his shirt. “I’m absolutely fine.” Then I drew his lips onto mine and focused on the dance of our tongues as he pushed in the rest of the way. My back arched, trying to escape the pressure, but I clung to him as if he was the key to keeping me safe.

His forehead dropped to my shoulder and a long slow breath warmed my neck.

Seconds passed before he spoke.

“Why do you have to feel so damn good, Rose?”

I had no response. I couldn’t believe my walls would feel good to anybody.

“Why do you have to be so perfect?”

I placed my hands either side of his face and lifted it. His dark eyes bore a blood red halo and he looked as though he’d just been to hell and back, not bliss.

“I’m not perfect, Dax,” I whispered. “I’m far from perfect.”

He studied my face intently. “You’re perfect to me.”

He bent down, took my lips in his and moved. Each time he thrust into me it felt like a deep, dark kiss. Each time he accompanied it with a low grown it felt like a prayer. His hips glided through my inner thighs and his chest grazed my nipples, sharpening them into diamonds. His mouth and tongue were relentless, constantly demanding my attention, drawing it away from the pain that increased inside me.

He pulled away once, to catch his breath and whisper out what sounded like poetry. “This is what heaven feels like. *You* are what heaven feels like.”

Sliding a hand under my bottom, he lifted me a couple of inches, sliding even more deeply into my body. My eyes rolled back with unfamiliar sensations. My virginity had well and truly gone now.

“Fuck, Rose,” he said, hoarsely. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Dax—” I gripped him tightly between my thighs and slid a hand round the back of his hot, damp neck. “I’m amazing. Trust me.”

“I can’t believe it. I’m going to come already.”

He sounded downright pissed off about it.

“You don’t have to,” I said with a whimper. “I’m not in any rush.”

He snorted. “It doesn’t work like that, Rose. For a guy, once you’re on that train, it’s near impossible to get off.”

“Can’t you think of something else? Like, I don’t know, work? Your family?”

“You think I can picture anything other than you when you’re finally beneath me? I’ll be damned if I start picturing other people while fucking the most beautiful girl in the world.”

My chest fluttered at the easy way he said the most vulnerable and generous thing I’d ever heard. “Then fuck me Dax. I want to feel you come inside me.”

His eyes suddenly glazed and he blinked several times like he couldn’t believe I’d just uttered those words.

“My queen,” he whispered, covering my face in kisses. “Your wish is my command.”

My stomach stiffened as I braced myself. His thrusts became deep and quick, and his jaw hardened. I focused on his full bottom lip as he pulled it between his teeth in concentration. Something about that lip was familiar. As soon as the image came to mind, I banished it. I didn’t want a recollection from days gone by to encroach on this moment that was proving to be one of the most memorable of my life.

But those lips…

Suddenly, his eyes squeezed shut and a pained expression crossed his face. He shoved himself deep inside me and shuddered forcefully. “Fuuuuck.”

In a beat of my battered heart, he thickened and burst, semen thrashing against the wall of my womb. His cock pulsed, releasing more jets. Then he relaxed.

His eyes opened briefly before he buried his face into my neck, panting and shaking with the aftershocks of his climax. He was right; I hadn't orgasmed. In fact, I couldn't ever imagine having an orgasm doing that, but I was still overcome by a sense of bliss.

"Dax—"

He shook his head against my neck. "I just need a minute."

He needed a minute? Who would need a minute after fucking me? It's not like I contributed in any way, at all. I'd just laid there while he did all the work.

I nodded silently and pushed my fingers through his sweat-damp hair.

Several minutes passed and I felt his lips open against the soft skin covering my throat. "I meant what I said."

I tugged gently at the strands of his hair. "Which part."

"Every part, but especially the part where I called you my queen."

I warmed shamelessly, feeling his hardness remain inside my body.

"And I would do anything for my queen."

His admission emboldened me. "In that case, I want you to fuck me again in the morning."

His breathing stopped and the weight of his chest lifted almost imperceptibly. Just as I began to feel concerned, he raised his head and peered down at me with a heat that bordered on blinding. "Forget fucking you in the morning, I'm going to make you come again now."

My body clenched around him of its own accord as he pulled his thick length from my depths. He placed his hands on my waist and flipped me onto my front without effort.

"Do you trust me?"

Do you trust me?

I nodded. "Yes."

"Spread your legs."

I buried my face into the bedsheets, acutely aware my bottom was right in front of his eyes. I forced my thighs apart and heard a soft moan behind me.

"I'm going to slide into you again, okay? I'll be gentle, I promise."

Slowly, he fed his length back into me. His come made it slide in more easily the second time. When he was fully embedded, he slid a hand beneath my stomach and pushed it down to my clit, then he fingered it tenderly.

"Beautiful," he muttered, laying just enough of his weight on my back for me to feel dominated but not threatened. He moved inside me more easily this time, his lips tickling the nape of my neck. My eyelids fluttered closed at the feel of his thick fingers massaging my nub. I loved feeling his tongue and lips at my core, but feeling his firm fingers massaging me along with his thick cock stroking my sore insides, blew that sensation out of the water.

"Are you okay?" he asked, for what felt like the millionth time.

This time I could only nod, because the heat radiating out from my core rendered me speechless.

"I can hold out for longer now." His voice was even deeper, scraping at the foot of his lungs. "So, tell me if it's too much."

I nodded again, my mouth buried into the sheets. "Mm-hm."

"So slick," he mused. "Like a damn rose petal." His breath thickened. "*Fuck*."

I somehow managed to move my head enough to free my mouth. "So good, Dax."

He throbbed above and inside me. "So good, baby."

Long, slow lengths massaged my newly broken walls while his talented fingers worked miracles over my clit. My entire body fizzed and coiled.

His brows nestled into my neck and his hot breath skittered across my back. "Jeez, I'm close again. What have you done to me?"

I squirmed beneath him, needing a release, needing something. Tension gripped my insides so tightly I couldn't tell where the desire was coming from or how that layered thirst could be quenched. He was massaging the outside of me and the inside of me; I was going to burst from at least one of those things.

"Oh my God. *Oh my God*." The proclamations began as whispers but they seemed to spur him on. His cock pushed deeper and his fingers worked harder. "Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh *God*."

"Shit Rose, you're gonna make me come." His breath hit the shell of my ear in ragged pants.

“Dax—” I gripped the bedsheets and buried my mouth in them, my eyes squeezed shut. *What the hell?*

He thrust hard and flicked my clit with a roar. I had an animal on top of me, inside me, releasing me. My whole body froze, then shook, tightened then released. Pleasure rippled from my centre to my skin and I screamed into the sheets as Dax unanchored a long stream of curses.

His thrusts continued even after he’d burst inside me. He fucked me slowly back to earth, wrapping his arms around me and whispering sweet words in my ear. “Just beautiful. The perfect rose. The sweetest smell. The softest bloom…”

And I was in heaven.

Rose

I WOKE up from the deepest, most blissful sleep I'd had in a long time, with an actual smile on my face. I was probably not the first girl to think this after her first time, but I genuinely believed it. I was in love.

It didn't matter that he'd locked me up in a tower until he could make me his. In some dark, fucked up way, I understood. We were both scarred. We both knew what it was to feel less than, and petrified at the thought of not getting the one we want. How much more perfect could this be? I wanted him. He wanted me. I went into this arrangement for the money, not for a second expecting to find love. But love was worth so much more than money; I would take the jewel of a heart over a wad of cash any day.

I opened my eyes and took in the beams of light streaming through the ripped curtains. Memories of the shattered chandelier and the broken pieces of ancient furniture came back to me in fractured forms. It had passed in a blur when I stormed into his rooms because I had only one thing on my mind, and that was to give him a piece of it.

The envelope the maid had given to me held a single piece of paper. A cheque for one hundred thousand pounds. He'd planned on paying me for something I hadn't given him and sending me on my way. It had stoked every single one of my insecurities. Had I been such a disappointment?

Was I not what he'd hoped for? The way he'd stared at – and smelled – my nakedness only hours earlier had convinced me of his attraction, so how could he just dump the money on me and run? And more to the point, how dare he?

He might not have thought it, but Dax had wooed me. From the second he invited me to dinner. I was blisteringly angry when I stormed up the stairs the previous evening. I'd failed to see how broken he was and how broken his rooms were. I was too blinded by the humiliation of rejection and the unfairness of being locked up and released on a damn whim.

I slowly turned my head, expecting to see the unscarred left side of his face that he'd laid me next to, but I saw nothing but a ruffled sheet. I ran my hand over the indentation left by his body. It was cold. He must have left a while ago. My eyes ran from the contoured dip to the pillow where they landed on an envelope. I reached across and opened it, my heartrate picking up boisterously.

Dear Rose,

I don't know where to begin so I'm just going to start with where my heart is. My heart is with you, Rose. You captured it the second it saw you and it's held out for you ever since. But things have changed. I'm not a good person and you've seen the worst of me. I cannot and will not inflict that on you again.

You gave me a precious gift last night. More precious than an organ, than a heartbeat. It was life. You showed me what true trust is and I will not abuse yours any longer.

You are going to go so far, Rose. Your passion for architecture, for design, for miraculous potential, is beyond measure. I'm privileged to have known you. Like a small bird I kept you locked up against your will. You had wings all along, I just clipped them, like I do with everything. You're free now Rose.

"

It was the architect Louis Kahn who once said, "The sun never knew how wonderful it was until it fell on the wall of a building." Your beauty and wonder eclipsed everything when you discovered yourself last night. I feel privileged to have been your wall.

I PAUSED to look around the damaged room. The light exposed the worst of it, but wherever shadows fell, only the charge of emotion remained.

A quote I'd committed to memory penetrated the lines. *Were it not for the shadows, there would be no beauty*.

I sat bolt upright. Every word in his letter – in fact, every word he had ever spoken to me – had the same tone as that of the boy in the bookshop.

The recollection hurtled back to me like a tidal wave. Over the years it had dimmed, taking on new, made-up forms. His eyes had become blue, his shoulders slightly more sloped, his mannerisms softer. But this time I was able to picture the exact boy, and he was freakishly familiar.

Dax Thorn was the bookshop boy.

You captured it the second it saw you and it's held out for you ever since.

And he'd known all along.

The room began to spin.

How had he known? How had he found me? Had he thought about me the way I'd thought about him for the last four years? And if he had, why was he letting me go?

My eyes searched the room as more became visible. I could hardly go storming into his suite; I was already in it. Where would he be? I dropped my gaze back to the letter.

Take this money, Rose. Do it for me. Spend it on university and getting the education you deserve. It's the least I can do in return for you giving me the most precious gift you could ever give. I didn't receive it lightly. It will stay with me for the rest of my life.

A car will collect you at noon and take you to the helipad. You'll be back in London before you know it and all this will be a distant memory. All I ask is that whenever you think of the time you lost your virginity, you remember how grateful I was (am) and how utterly, incomprehensibly, undeserving.

All my heart,

Dax

I glanced down at the envelope which trembled in my hands. The same cheque fell out, mocking me. The envelope itself was fast becoming drenched in my tears. How had I made such a mess of everything? If he really was that boy, where had he been and why had he held out until now? And if he truly felt this way, why was he running now he had me?

A clock somewhere in his suite that had miraculously survived the assault donged eleven times. A car would arrive in one hour and I'd be taken from the island forever.

I sprung out of bed and hopped at speed through the room, out of Dax's suite, down the winding stairs and into my room. I splashed my face, brushed my teeth and changed into a pair of exceedingly expensive jeans and a loose vest. I wrapped my hair into a bun on the top of my head, grabbed a pair of trainers, and limped out of my room into the cavernous Blackcap Hall.

At the foot of the wide staircase, I collided with Harrod, Dax's butler.

"Hello sir," I gasped. "Have you seen Master Thorn?"

His eyes popped as he stared at me, ruffled by my obviously panicked and uncouth display of anxiety. "About an hour ago, miss. He was heading for the stables."

Stables?

"And, um, would you mind telling me how to get to the stables?"

He snapped his feet together as though he was a member of the cavalry and tipped his chin upwards. "I wouldn't mind at all, but if he has gone for a ride, you'll have missed him. And I do believe a car will be here for you in… forty-five minutes."

"Just… tell me," I said, fighting exasperation.

He sighed like a petulant child. “Fine. Go out the *back* doors, take a diagonal right across the gardens, round the upper edge of Lady’s Paddock, to the double gates. Beyond that are the stables.”

“Thank you,” I gushed, then hobbled a few steps before spinning round again. “Um–“

“The back doors are that way.” Harrod pointed in the opposite direction to which I was heading.

“Thank you.”

His smile was more genuine and I took that as a total green light to pursue Master Dalziel Thorn.

I limped through the back doors, along the gardens, round the paddock. I clambered over the gates and lunged for the stables. But apart from three impeccably bred Irish Greys and a lame Cob, the place was deserted.

I landed heavily on a bale of hay and sank my face into my hands. It was entirely possible I would never see Dax again. I was convinced I’d found the boy of my dreams after all these years and I’d blown it. I sobbed quietly into my palms, afraid to lift my head in case the cold harsh light illuminated all my pain and failings. I yearned for shadows. Shadows were warm, protective, nurturing. If I had the choice of sunshine or shadows, I would take shadows any day.

I felt so sad and so confused I didn’t register the sound of hooves softly entering the stable block, despite the fact they echoed around it. It was the sound of a soft whinny that made me look up.

Dax

"WHAT ARE YOU STILL DOING HERE?"

I couldn't help the bite in my tone. I'd worked hard in the last couple of hours to dispel any hope that Rose Hemingway might genuinely feel something for me and want to stick around.

The sex we had and the climaxes we shared were like a dream. An unbelievable dream. I'd had sex many times before last night, but those two times with Rose felt like the first time I'd ever connected with another, and that was almost more potent than the climaxes themselves.

I had to remind myself she was suffering from Stockholm Syndrome. I'd caused that. Her orgasm wasn't about me or the pleasure I gave her; it was about the fact she felt safe in an oppressive situation. She'd learned – very quickly – to identify with her captor for the sake of her safety. It meant less than nothing.

She looked up, and something about her expression unnerved me. It was as though she was seeing the real me, not some persona I'd created to make me feel like I actually belonged in a charismatic billionaire family.

"You knew, didn't you?"

Her words froze me but her tired, accusatory tone cut through the ice.

"Knew what?"

“We met years ago. I was fourteen. How old were you?”

My shoulders dropped, almost in relief. A part of me had wanted her to remember, but the other part of me was scared to death that if she did, she might think I was some crazy stalking lunatic. Will, the truth was out, whether I liked it or not. The pressure left me in waves.

“I wasn’t lusting after a child if that’s what you’re implying,” I said, with an edge in my tone. “I was nineteen. And to be frank, you were the brightest, most interesting girl I’d ever met. Your age only made you more impressive.”

“Did you know who you were bidding on?”

Her voice was so level I couldn’t be sure if she was accusing me or mocking me.

“Yes.”

“How?”

I sighed, calmly. “After your mother yanked you from me, I needed to know who you were, so… I had you followed.”

She arched a brow. “For how long?”

“Long enough to find out your name, where you lived, who with. As long as I knew who you were, I could track you down whenever I wanted. I had eyes on you at various points over the years,” I said. “You may have forgotten me but I never forgot you.”

Her eyes softened. “I never forgot you.”

That response made my temperature rise and my hope soar. We stared at each other, re-learning everything we thought we knew.

“In fact, I’ve thought about you a lot since we met in that bookshop. I went back there every day for a year, hoping to run into you again.”

I stood in my stirrups, swung my right leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground. Rinka, my Andalusian mare, bent her neck to nuzzle my arm. I obligingly drew a handful of mints from my pocket and fed them to her, then turned back to Rose.

“I know.”

Her eyes widened. “You knew?”

I led Rinka into a stall where she occupied herself with a net of hay. I felt Rose’s gaze follow me.

“Why didn’t you come back?”

I pushed my hands into my breeches and leaned a shoulder against the wall. “There was no point.”

She slowly shook her head. “You hadn’t been injured then, so don’t try the self-esteem excuse on me. You were so confident back then, so charismatic. I would have melted into a puddle if you’d shown an interest in me. And you knew it.”

“It’s not that.” I released another sigh. I hadn’t expected to have to tell this part of the story, but since she’d asked… “The Isle of Crow is run by a consortium of families. Mine is one of them. We have… traditions. One of them is that the children of the premier families can only marry within the consortium. We can’t marry anyone outside of it, and that includes anyone on the mainland. It’s a protective measure to keep all the wealth on the island.”

For a second, I thought her skin had paled.

“So, you’re told who you can and can’t marry?”

I scrubbed a hand over my face. “Usually, yes, but… after the incident, it was agreed I wouldn’t be bound to the same rules.”

Her brows knitted together. “Why?”

I focused on her face and not the pain of this admission which still felt like a fresh, open wound. “Because…” The back of my neck began to sweat. *The families don’t want to subject their daughters to a freak like me.* “After enduring what I did, they thought the least they could do was give me some freedom.”

She stood and limped towards me. When she raised her hand, I didn’t flinch. She could slap me again and it would feel like a kiss. When she stroked her fingertips down the scars on my cheek, I held my breath. “What happened to you, Dax?”

I took her wrist, bringing her fingertips to my lips. “I don’t want you to know.”

Her big eyes looked softly up at me. “Why?”

“I don’t want you to be burdened with it. I want you to go home and live your life.” I pressed a kiss to the pad of her ring finger.

“I’ll be burdened if you don’t tell me.”

I narrowed my eyes on her.

“I care about you, Dax. Ever since we first met, I haven’t been able to get you out of my head. I never thought I’d see you again, and now that I have, I want to know everything. I don’t want to lose you again.”

Her words were so determined and her expression so sincere, something inside me cracked. “I’m not going to hurt you, you know.”

She recoiled slightly. “I know.”

“You’re free to go, Rose. You’re not my prisoner anymore.”

“I *know*,” she repeated. “I don’t want to go.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “I don’t understand. Why?”

She pressed both palms to the sides of my face. “Haven’t you heard anything I’ve just said? I’ve wanted you since that day in the bookshop. Now that I’ve found you… and after everything we shared last night… I’m not letting you go.”

The crack in my heart widened, letting in a beam of light. “But… my scars.”

“They’re who you are. Just like mine are who I am.” She breathed steadily, still holding my face. “What happened?”

I sucked in a deep breath. I hadn’t told anyone this.

“It was acid. Someone threw a bucket of acid over me.”

Her expression contorted in slow motion. “What? Who would do that?”

The wall of my chest thickened. “That’s not important. You wanted to know what happened. That’s what happened. I was a victim.” I sighed angrily. “It takes a lot for me to admit that.”

Her gaze searched my face, her pupils widening. Her lips were soft and wet. I wanted to slip my tongue between them. Then something else cut through her gentle features. Hatred. Was not for whomever had done this to me? I changed the subject.

“What about your scars? How did you get those?”

She closed her eyes as if retrieving a memory stored in the very depths of her mind. “I was hanging out with a guy who lived close by. It wasn’t long after I met you. My stepfather had moved in and was kind of taking over our lives. I used to hang out at this guy’s house just to get away from it all.”

“Who was this guy?”

She looked away for a brief moment. “No one important. A local artist. I used to hang out in his garden studio. One time I was in there studying and the place went up in flames.”

My insides twisted. “Was it an accident?”

She closed her eyes again. “No.”

An inexplicable charge of rage darted up my spine.

“The fire wasn’t meant for me. I managed to escape but he didn’t. He died in there.”

“Do you know who caused it?”

Her chin tilted and she gazed up at me. “Does it matter?”

I ground my teeth together before replying. “Yes.”

“Why?” she asked, the corner of her mouth curling upwards.

“Because I will kill them.”

The corner of her mouth flattened like she couldn’t believe I’d just said that.

“I mean it Rose. If I ever find out who did that to you, I will fucking kill them.”

Her eyes darkened and she stared at me.

“If you care so much, why are you sending me away?”

I ground my teeth. “Because you deserve better.”

She stood abruptly. “Do you really believe that?”

“With everything I am.”

“And I can’t convince you you’re wrong.”

I cast my gaze to the floor. “No.”

Seconds passed and silence stretched between them. I closed my eyes, unable to look at her, even for one last time. I only looked up when her quick footsteps carried her towards the barn exit.

“Where are you going?

She spun around and shrugged, her arms flopping in defeat. “There’s a car waiting for me. I’ll be back in London before I know it, right?”

My heart broke again. “That’s right.”

“Goodbye Dax.” She spun back around and stalked out of the stables.

I was numb when I returned to Rinka. I went through the motions untacking her and sponging her down. Usually, it was a groom’s job but I insisted; it helped strengthen the bond between horse and rider. And considering I was destined to spend the rest of my life alone, with only animals for company, it was all I had left.

Dax

HALF AN HOUR LATER, I climbed the tower stairs. The place felt deserted. The security men, maid and butlers who'd been hovering around over the last few weeks were gone. There was no need for them now. I felt nothing as I pushed open the door to my rooms. They'd already been straightened out. Broken furniture had been replaced, the whisky cabinet restocked, the chandelier mended. If I was capable of feeling anything at that point, it would been cold, hard guilt.

I was drawn to the bedroom, even though it would be etched on my mind forever as the place I learned how to truly love another person. The first thing I saw was the envelope. I knew it held the cheque I'd tried to give her but I was drawn to it anyway. I held it up and out fluttered the cheque and a small scrap of paper. I unfolded it and read.

Dearest Dax,

Carl Jung once said, "There is no light without shadow and no wholeness without imperfection." I just wanted you to know that ever since the fire, I've lived in the shadows. Meeting you again has brought me out into

the light. The rest of the world sees our scars as imperfections but in your arms I felt whole.

I may not have taken what I came for, but I'm leaving with so much more: a capacity to love that I never knew existed.

I'll remember you always.

Rose x

My throat was dry. I hadn't swallowed since I entered the room and I didn't recall breathing either. Now, all I could feel was pain. Splinters of agony breaking out across every surface of my skin. The grief made me shake.

Before my head could catch up, my heart propelled my feet out of the room, down the stairs, across the hall and out to a waiting car. I didn't care which of my cars it was – I hadn't driven so much since my eyesight had worsened – but realising I was sitting in a Lamborghini didn't hurt. I pressed the accelerator and burned down the drive, through the gates and out onto the coastal road.

According to my watch, I had three minutes to reach the helipad if I were to stop her. I called the pilot but it rang out continually with the deafening noise of whirring propellors drowning out the sound. She'd be sitting in the helicopter already, strapped in and ready to go. I couldn't let her leave. The whole way there, I chewed on her words. I made her whole; I brought her shadows into the light. I couldn't have put it any more accurately myself. She had put into words the exact same feelings I was battling with.

I crested the hill and the helipad came into view. I pressed my foot to the floor, racing to the aircraft which was poised for take-off. At the edge of the tarmac, I ignored all the safety signs and ploughed onto the field, swerving to a halt about three millimetres from the nose of the helicopter. The car engine hummed as I leapt out and yanked open the aircraft door. Rose's mouth dropped open.

I stretched out my arms, the wind from the propellors whipping my shirt collar up around my neck.

"Rose, come here," I called out over the din.

In slow motion, she unbuckled her seat belt and clambered across to me. I wrapped my arms around her small body and yanked her from the aircraft. Bypassing my car, I carried her to the sun-warmed lawns where I placed her gently on the ground. The pilot thankfully got the message no one was leaving and switched off the engine. As the propellors slowed and Rose's hair settled messily around her shoulders, I pressed my palms to her cheeks.

"I'll tell you everything," I whispered.

Her large eyes rippled like freshly poured whisky.

"What?"

"I'll tell you what happened to me. What caused my scars. I'll tell you everything you want to know, if…"

Her head tilted to one side. "If what?"

"If you agree to join yourself to me forever. If you agree to that, I'll let you in."

"I-I don't understand."

I couldn't hide the smile from my marred face. "I've met her Rose. I've met the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. I've wasted the last four years hiding myself away, hoping I would get just one more glimpse of you – one more chance. I don't want to waste any more time, Rose. If you'll have me, then I will take you now. You will have my unwavering attention, my unbridled devotion, for the rest of your days."

Her head shifted from side to side. "But, what about my mum…"

"Tell her," I said. "Tell her you've met someone. Bring her here, let her see for herself how happy I can make her daughter." I kissed her forehead with urgency. "I know I've gone about this in an unconventional way, but I will make you so happy Rose. You're my purpose now. If you leave, I will track you down. I've seen the love in your eyes. As long as it burns there, I won't ever give up. So, you can either leave now and have me stalk you every day for as long as you live, or you can give in to me and let me make you mine."

Her voice weakened, like her fight. "University…"

"You can attend classes from here. I'll pay your expenses." I ran a hand through her hair and gripped it hard, steeling my gaze on hers. "You don't ever need to worry about money again."

Her face paled. "But… I—"

“I know you don’t want this for the money Rose. The cheque for a hundred thousand pounds lying on my bed is proof of that. But I have it, so if I can use it to help you fulfil your dreams, let me.”

“Dax…” Her eyes brimmed with unspilled tears. “I don’t know what to say.”

I let out a breath, releasing all the demons that over the years had taken up residence in my bones. “Say you’ll be my wife.”

Her face bloomed with shock.

“Say you’ll be my Rose Thorn.”

She pressed her fingers to her lips and stifled an adorable giggle. “Seriously? That will be my name?”

I wrapped an arm around her neck and pulled her into me, feeling my cock stiffen as I held her close. “Fuck yes. And you will be the most beautiful, most fragrant, most lethal Thorn that ever lived.”

She peered up at me and her expression darkened. Shadows amidst light. Imperfections against wholeness. She was multi-dimensional, multi-faceted – the full package.

And I knew then, not only had I met my soulmate, I’d met my match.

The End.

FOLLOW Rose and Dax’s story in Jagged Thorns, book 1 of the Thorn Trilogy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

January James lives in the rural southeast of England with her husband, daughter, crazy sprockapoo, Ralph, and the occasional errant grass snake. Until recently, she inhabited the fast-paced, adrenalin-fuelled workplaces she writes about as a communications professional. Now she spends her days dreaming up new characters and stories and trying her best to avoid indoor soft play.

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